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# THE TEMPTRESS







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*PART I.*

PARIS.







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## CHAPTER I.

**A**S usual, the Marqués de Torre Bianca got up late. Leaving the security of his bedroom, he cast an uneasy glance at the letters and newspapers waiting for him on a silver salver in the library. Some of the postmarks were foreign. At sight of these he breathed a sigh of relief. That much respite at least . . . . But some of the letters were from Paris ; and at these he frowned. He knew what they would be like. They would be long and full of unpleasant allusions, to say nothing of reproaches and threats . . . . He noted uncomfortably the addresses printed on some of the envelopes, and at their names, his creditors appeared before him, an indignant and vociferous crowd . . . . Alas ! He knew what was in those letters.

If they had only been addressed to his wife ! She received letters like that with the utmost serenity, as though debts and clamorous creditors were her native element—"The Fair Elena" her friends called her, acknowledging a beauty which couldn't be denied, but which her women friends liked to allude to as "historic"—it had lasted so long. The Marqués, however, had a more antiquated conception of honour than the historically fair Elena. He went so far as to believe that it is better not to contract debts if there is no possibility of paying them.



Fearful lest the servant should find him still dubiously eyeing his mail, the Marqués began opening his letters . . . . After all, they were not so bad ! One was from the firm which had sold the Marquésa her most recently acquired automobile. Of the ten instalments to be paid, it had collected only two . . . . And there were numerous other letters from shops that supplied the Marquésa with her needs. From her establishment near the Place Vendôme her debts had reached out and permeated the neighbourhood. The maintenance, to say nothing of the comfort of the establishment necessitated the services of innumerable tradespeople.

The servants had just as good reason to write him letters as the tradespeople. But instead, they relied upon the worldly arts of the Marquésa to provide them with a means of compensating themselves for long unpaid services. So they expressed their disgust by a reluctant and unbending attitude in the discharge of their duties.

The Marqués was wont, when he had finished the perusal of his morning mail, to look about him with something very like alarm. There was his wife Elena, giving parties and going to all the most distinguished festivities in Paris ; occupying the most desirable apartment of an elegant house on a fashionable street, keeping a luxurious automobile, and never less than five servants. By what mysterious adjustments and manœuvres could his wife and he keep up this manner of life ? Every day there were new debts ; every day they required more money for perpetually increasing expenses. Whatever funds he had disappeared like a river in the sand. And yet Elena seemed to consider this manner of living reasonable and proper, just as though it were that of all her friends . . . .

At this point the Marqués caught sight of a letter he had overlooked, a letter bearing an Italian postmark.

"From Mother," he said.

As he read it his expression lightened. He even smiled.



Yet this letter, too, had complaints to make. But they were gentle, resigned.

The echoes of his mother's voice awakened in his memory by her words called up before him the old white palace of the Torre Biancas, one of the monuments of his distant Tuscany. Huge, in ruins now, surrounded by gardens of the past, with vast halls of which the floors were tiled, and the ceilings were gay with paintings of mythological scenes, it had long contained a wealth of famous paintings, that hung on its bare walls, marking out their squares and rectangles in the dust gathering for centuries on the slowly crumbling plaster.

But the pictures and the priceless bits of statuary had already vanished from their places when the Marqués' father took possession of his ancestral halls. His only resource for an income lay in the archives of the Torre Biancas. Autographs of Machiavelli, Michelangelo, and other Florentines who had had correspondence with his ancestors paid the expenses of one generation . . . .

Around the palace the gardens of three centuries stretched out their marble steps, and balustrades crumbling under the weight of matted rose vines, to the Tuscan sun. Mosses and vines crept into the cracks of the stone, tracing out their patterns with supreme indifference to the decay their presence caused. On the drives, the ancient box, cut back to form wide walls and deep triumphal arches, looked as black as the ruins of a burnt city. It was so long now since the gardens had received any care that they were beginning to look like a flowering forest. The paths at the step of infrequent visitors sent out melancholy echoes which startled the birds like the shot of an arrow, disturbed swarms of insects floating under the outspreading branches, and startled the little snakes crawling among the tree trunks.

Wearing the clothes of a simple peasant, and served only by a little country girl, the mother of the Marqués lived



alone in these vast halls and gardens, accompanied by thoughts of her son, preoccupied with the problem he presented. How was she to provide money for him?

The only visitors at the palace were dealers in antiques to whom she sold, one by one, the remnants of a splendour already pillaged by those who had preceded her at Torre Bianca. But she must send several thousand lire to that last member of the noble line, who was playing a part worthy of his title in London, Paris, and all the great cities of the world. And convinced that fortune, so mindful of the first Torre Biancas, would finally remember her son, she reduced her own needs to the barest necessities, and ate peasant's food served to her on a rough pine table, in one of those marble rooms in which nothing now remained that could be sold.

Touched, as always, by her letter, the Marqués was murmuring softly to himself: "Mother! Mother!" He read again:

"I didn't know what to do, Federico, after sending you the money you last received from me. If you could see the house in which you were born, my son, I wonder what you would say? No one will offer me more than a twentieth part of its value. But, until some foreigner who really wants to buy it comes along, I am willing to sell the floors, and even those wonderful old ceilings, the only things left now that have any market value. Anything to get you out of your difficulties, to prevent the slightest reproach from attaching to your name. I can live on very little, perhaps even less than I allow myself now. But isn't it, at the same time, possible for you and Elena to reduce your expenses a little without Elena's giving up in any way the position that being your wife entitles her to? Your wife is rich! Can't she help you to keep up your establishment?"

The Marqués paused. The simple way in which his mother expressed her anxieties hurt him; and her illusions



about Elena stabbed him like remorse. She believed Elena to be rich! She believed that he could induce his wife to live economically and simply . . . hadn't he tried to at the beginning of their marriage . . . ?

Elena's arrival cut short his reflections. It was already past eleven and she was going out to take her daily drive in the Bois. She liked to begin the day with this open air review of her acquaintances.

The somewhat ostentatious elegance of her dress suited her kind of beauty. Although between thirty and forty, frequent fasts and eternal vigilance still preserved her slenderness, which was enhanced by her height; and the care she took of her person kept her in what might be called that "third youth" which the women of our great modern cities enjoy.

It was only when she was absent that Torre Bianca was aware of her faults. As soon as she stepped into the room, his admiration of her took complete possession of him, making him accede blindly to whatever she might ask.

She greeted him now with a smile, to which he responded. Putting her arms about his shoulders, she kissed him, and began talking to him with a childish lisp, which, well he knew, presaged a request—and yet this trick of her's had never lost its power to stir him, subduing his will.

"Good morning, Bunny! I got up late this morning, and I have a thousand things to do before going out, but I couldn't go without seeing my darling little Rabbit . . . Give me another kiss, and I'm off!"

Smiling humbly, with an air of submissive gratitude like that of a faithful dog, the Marqués allowed himself to be petted. Elena finally tore herself away, but before she had quite reached the library door she suddenly remembered something important and stopped short.

"Have you some money?"

The Marqués' smile vanished. His eyes put the question:



"How much do you want?"

"Oh, not so much. About eight thousand francs."

Elena's tailor, one on the Rue de la Paix, needless to say, had suddenly stopped being as respectful as Elena thought he should be, for his bill was only three years old—and he had threatened court proceedings.

At her husband's gesture when she mentioned this sum, Elena's childlike smile vanished; but she still used her little girl's lisp to complain.

"You say that you love me, Federico, and you refuse to give me this little bit of money . . . ."

"There are some of the letters and claims of our creditors . . ." The Marqués pointed to the heap on the table.

Elena smiled once more, but this time there was something cruel about the curl of her lips.

"I can show you a great many documents as interesting as those. But you are a man, and men are supposed to provide money in their homes so that their wives needn't suffer . . . How am I to pay my debts if you don't help me?"

He looked at her with something like fear in his eyes.

"I have given you such a lot of money! But everything that falls into your hands vanishes like smoke."

Elena's voice was hard as she replied:

"You aren't going to pretend that a woman of my position, or of my appearance—since people *will* mention it—should live in a shabby sort of way? When a man's vanity gets so much satisfaction out of having a wife like me, he ought to bring home money by the million."

It was the Marqués' turn to be offended, and Elena, aware of the effect of her words, suddenly changed her manner, smiled, and came close enough to be able to put her hands on Federico's shoulders.

"Why don't you write to the old lady, Federico? Perhaps she can send us some money, she can sell an heirloom or something . . . ."



The tone of these words only added to her husband's irritation.

"The person you mention is my mother, and I wish you would speak of her as such. As to money, she can't send us any more."

Elena looked at her husband with a certain contempt, saying at the same time, as though to herself :

"This will teach me to fall in love with paupers . . . . Well, if you can't get me this money, I'll get it !"

As she spoke an expression so significant flickered over her face that her husband sprang from his chair.

"You had better explain what you mean," he began, frowning. But he could not go on. The Marquésa's expression had completely changed. She broke out into bursts of childish laughter, and clapped her hands.

"At last, my Bunny is really angry. And he thought his wife meant something bad . . . . But don't you know that I love no one but you ? Really, no one else . . . ."

She caught him by the arm, and kissed him repeatedly, in spite of his attempt to make her stop her caresses. And he ended by yielding to them and assuming once more his humble suitor attitude.

Elena was warning him now with upraised finger.

"Come, smile a little, don't be naughty . . . . But isn't there really any money ? Do you mean it ?"

The Marqués shook his head. Then he looked ashamed of his powerlessness.

"But I love you just as much," she said. "Let the old debts wait ! I'll find a way out—I have before . . . . Good-bye, Federico !"

And she walked backwards towards the door, throwing him kisses ; but once on the other side of the hangings, her expression of youthful light-heartedness vanished. Her lips were twisted with scorn. A look of frantic ferocity glittered in her eyes.



Her husband too, when he was alone, lost the momentary happiness Elena's caresses had afforded him. There lay those letters, and his mother's appeal . . . . He sat at the table, his face in his hands. All his anxieties had swooped down upon him: he could scarcely breathe in the thick swarm.

Always, at such moments, Torre Bianca called up memories of his youth as though they could offer him a remedy for present troubles. The happiest period of his life had been that period when he had been a student in the Engineering School at Liège. Eager to restore the fallen splendour of his house, he had thrown himself into his preparations for a modern career, in order to set out on the conquest of money, just as his remote ancestors had done. Before royalty had bestowed a title upon them, they had been Florentine merchants, like the Medicis, travelling even to the Orient in their pursuit of fortune. Federico de Torre Bianca wanted to be an engineer for the same reason that all the other youths of his generation did; in order to make Italy, once famous for her art, an important modern nation because of her industries.

As he recalled his student life, the first image that arose was that of Manuel Robledo, his friend and class-mate. Manuel was a Spanish youth whose frank and happy disposition made it possible for him to meet daily problems with quiet energy. For several years he had played the part of elder brother to the distinguished young Italian, and Torre Bianca never failed to think of his friend in difficult moments.

He was such a good fellow! Not even his successive love affairs could destroy his serenity. He had the poise of a mature man, perhaps because the important interests of his life were good eating and the guitar . . . .

Torre Bianca, who was endowed with a fatal facility for falling in love, went about in those days with one of the pretty girls of Liège, and Robledo, out of good fellowship,



feigned an absorbing interest in one of her friends. As a matter of fact, he was always much more attentive to the culinary activities of their parties than to the not very insistent claims of sentiment.

Yet Torre Bianca had come to discern through this somewhat noisy and unquestionably materialistic joviality of his friend a certain leaning towards the romantic which Robledo tried manfully to hide, as though it were a shameful weakness. Perhaps, in his country, there had been some experience . . . . So, often, at night, the Italian boy, stretched on his dormitory bed, heard the guitar softly moaning as Robledo hummed the love-songs of his far-away homeland . . . . Their course over, the friends had parted, expecting to meet just the same the following year ; but that meeting had never occurred. While Torre Bianca remained in Europe, Robledo roved about through South America, for the most part in his capacity as engineer, but now and then he went through an extraordinary transformation, as though his Spanish blood made it imperative that some of the old *Conquistadores* should live in him once more.

At rare intervals he wrote to Torre Bianca, but his letters contained more allusions to the past than to the present. Yet, somewhat in spite of his discreet reticence, Torre Bianca gathered that his chum had become a general in one of the small republics of Central America.

It was two years now since he had heard from Robledo whose last letter announced that he was employed in Argentina, having had enough, for the time being, of those countries still continually shaken by revolution. He was contracting for the Government as well as for private undertakings, and constructing canals and railroads ; and through all the discomforts of the rough life he led, the belief that he was helping the advance guard of civilization to cross one of the earth's desert places, gave him intimate satisfaction and happiness.



Torre Bianca had among his papers a photograph of his friend in which Robledo appeared on horseback, wearing an African helmet and a *poncho* that fell over his shoulders. Several half-breeds were planting linesman's flags on the *mesa* which, for the first time since creation was to receive the imprint of material civilization. Robledo who was of the same age as himself, must have been thirty-seven when the photograph was taken; yet he looked many years younger than Torre Bianca did at forty.

His life of adventure had not let him grow old. Although he was heavier than in his student days, the smooth face that smiled serenely out of the photograph indicated perfect physical condition.

Torre Bianca, on the other hand, was of a much slighter build, and thanks to his fondness for sports and especially fencing, he preserved a more than youthful agility. But his face was lined and drawn. There were furrows between his eyebrows, and the hair above his temples was already streaked with white, while the corners of his mouth, but slightly hidden by a short moustache, drooped with what might be lassitude, or what might be weakness of will. And Torre Bianca, struck by Robledo's physical robustness, was encouraged by this photograph to go on thinking of him as competent to guide and help him, just as he had done in the early days . . . .

As he thought of his friend that morning in the midst of his anxieties, he said to himself :

" I wish I had him here ! His strong man's strong will would strengthen mine . . . . "

The butler interrupted his meditation. A caller . . . but he would not give his name . . . . Torre Bianca made a determined effort to conceal his nervous dread from the servant. Was it perhaps one of his wife's creditors trying to reach him ?

" He seems a foreigner, sir. He says he's a relative. . . . "



The Marqués had a presentiment, but he smiled at it. It was absurd. . . . Yet it would be like Robledo to turn up in this fashion, as if he were a character in a play, coming in just when the action requires his appearance. But how unlikely that Robledo, who when last heard from, was in another hemisphere, should be on hand to take up his cue like an actor waiting in the wings ! No ; life doesn't provide such neat coincidences . . . only books. . . .

He would not see his caller, he told the servant in no uncertain terms. At that moment some one lifted the door-hangings, and, to the butler's consternation, stepped into the room. The caller had grown tired of waiting.

The Marqués, who was easily roused, went threateningly towards the intruder. His arms outstretched, the latter cried :

" You don't know me—I'll bet you don't ! "

Clean-shaven, his skin tanned and reddened by sun and cold, he didn't look like the Robledo of the photograph. And yet . . . there was something familiarly distinctive about him, something Torre Bianca recognised as having once formed a part of his own life. . . . Something in the vigorous curve of the shoulders, something about his energetic robustness. . . .

" Robledo ! "

The friends embraced ; and the servant, convinced now that his presence was superfluous, left the room.

As they smoked and talked, Robledo and Torre Bianca looked at one another with eager interest, putting out a hand now and then to assure themselves that the long-absent friend was really there.

It was the Marqués who betrayed the greater curiosity.

" Will you be able to stay long in Paris ? " he inquired.

" Oh, just a few months. . . . "

He felt the need, he added, of a long draught of civilisation after spending ten years in American deserts, absorbed



in the strenuous task of building roads, railroads and canals across their wide extent.

"I want to find out if the Paris restaurants still deserve their reputation, and see if the French wines are as good as they used to be. And I haven't had any *fromage de Brie* for years—no other country in the world can make it—and I'm hungry for some!"

The Marqués laughed. The same old Robledo, ready to go three thousand miles to have a meal in Paris! And then, with great interest, he inquired:

"Are you rich?"

"Poor as ever," was Robledo's prompt reply. "But I'm alone in the world; I'm not married—there's nothing so expensive as a wife—so, for a few months, I'll be able to spend money like a regular American millionaire. I have the money I've been earning all this time; I couldn't spend it in the desert."

He turned to look about him at the luxurious furnishings of his friend's home.

"You're the fellow that's rich, I see!"

The Marqués' only reply was an enigmatical smile; but Robledo's words awakened his worries.

"Tell me about what you have been doing," the engineer urged. "You never sent me much news of yourself. Some of your letters must have been lost, although wherever I went, up to recently, I always established a good many connections. Yes, I know a little about you. I believe you got married a few years ago."

Torre Bianca nodded, and said gravely:

"I married a Russian lady, the widow of a high Government official of the Czar's court. I met her in London. We met frequently at balls and country houses . . . and finally we married. We make a few pretensions to elegance—but it's damned expensive!"

He paused for a moment, as though he wanted to learn



what impression this summary of his life made upon Robledo. But the latter, eager to learn more, wisely kept silence.

"You, my dear Robledo, leading the simple life of primitive man, are lucky enough not to know what it costs to live in our civilisation. I've worked like a dog just to keep things going—and even at that! And my poor old mother helps me with whatever she can get out of our family ruins."

Then Torre Bianca seemed to repent of the note of complaint in what he was saying; and with an optimism which, a half-hour ago he would have considered absurd, he smiled, and went on:

"Really, I ought not to complain. There is a friendship that means a great deal in my life. Do you know the banker, Fontenoy? You may have heard of him; he has business all over the world."

Robledo shook his head. No, he had never heard that name.

"He is an old friend of my wife's family. Thanks to Fontenoy, I became a while ago the director of some development projects in foreign countries, for which I get a salary that would have seemed to me magnificent a few years ago."

Robledo expressed his professional curiosity. "Improvements in foreign countries!" Of course the engineer wanted to know more about that, and asked some very definite questions. But Torre Bianca betrayed a certain uneasiness in his replies. He stammered, and his sallow cheeks reddened slightly.

"Enterprises in Asia and in Africa—gold mines, and a railroad in China—a shipping company formed to handle the rice products of Tonkin, and—as a matter of fact, I'm not up on the scheme as a whole. I've never had time for the trip, and then, too, I can't leave my wife. But Fontenoy, who has a great head for business, has been to all these



places, and I have the greatest confidence in him. As a matter of fact, my job is just a matter of signing reports made by the experts Fontenoy sends out there to satisfy the shareholders."

Robledo could not conceal a certain astonishment at these words. Torre Bianca, aware of his friend's wonderment, changed the subject. He began talking of his wife, in a tone which indicated that he thought it one of the achievements of his life to have won her. He knew that Elena charmed everyone who came within the reach of her beauty. But as he had never, since his marriage, felt the slightest doubt concerning her affections, he was content to follow her meekly about, scarcely visible in the foaming wake of her triumphant progress. As a matter of fact, everything that came his way, invitations, generous pay for his services, a cordial reception wherever he went, came to him, not because he was the Marqués de Torre Bianca, but because he was Elena's husband.

"You'll see her in a little while. And, of course, you'll have lunch with us. You can't refuse. I have some choice wines, and since you have come all the way from the western hemisphere for some Brie cheese, I'll see that you get plenty of it."

And then he added, in a tone that partly betrayed his emotion :

"I can't tell you how glad I am that you are going to meet my wife. Everyone calls her '*la bella Elena*'—but she has something so much better than beauty ! She has a disposition just like a child's—capricious, yes, sometimes, like a child—and she needs lots of money. But what woman doesn't ? And I know Elena will be glad to see you—she has heard me speak so often of my friend Robledo !"



## CHAPTER II

THE Marquésa de Torre Bianca, having come home in good humour, was disposed to find her husband's friend very entertaining. For the moment she had forgotten her pressing need of money, quite as though she had found a means of satisfying her creditors.

At lunch, Robledo had a great deal to do to satisfy her curiosity about him. She wanted to know all the thrilling episodes of his adventurous life ! Nor could she possibly believe that he wasn't rich. How unlikely that anyone from America—either North or South America, it didn't matter which—should not be rich, shouldn't have millions ! It required an effort for the Marquésa, as it does for most Europeans, to reason that even in the New World there must be people who are poor.

"But I'm not rich at all," protested Robledo. "Of course, I shall try to die a millionaire, just so as not to disillusion all the people who believe so firmly that whoever goes to America must by that very fact make a great fortune, so that he can leave it when he dies to his nieces and nephews in Europe !"

He began to talk about Patagonia and his undertakings there. With his partner, a young American from the States, whom he had met in Buenos Aires, he had tried to colonise several thousand acres near the Rio Negro. He had risked in this enterprise all his savings, and those of his partner, as well as whatever sums he could persuade the banks to advance to him ; but he felt certain of the safety of the investment, and he believed that it would be the source of a great fortune.



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It was his job to transform the desert lands of this tract, purchased at a low price because of their aridity, into irrigated fields. The Argentine Government was carrying on extensive operations in the Rio Negro region, trying to divert some of its waters. Robledo, who had been one of the engineers first employed to carry out this scheme, resigned in order to colonise the lands which he was buying up in the areas through which the Government irrigation system was sure to be extended sooner or later.

"In a few years, or even in a few months, I may strike gold," he was saying. "Everything depends, of course, on how the river behaves. If it amiably allows itself to be divided up, and doesn't rise suddenly, in the grip of one of those violent convulsions which are so frequent there, and which destroy the work of years in a few hours. . . . Meanwhile, my partner and I have been constructing with the strictest economy all the minor canals and the other arteries which are to irrigate our waste lands ; and on the day when the dyke is finished, and the Rio Negro waters flow outward into our desert property . . . "

Robledo stopped short, smiling.

"Then," he went on, "I shall be a millionaire in regular American style. No one knows what the extent of our fortune may be. One square mile of irrigated land is worth several millions, and I own several square miles."

Elena was listening breathlessly. But Robledo, as if made uneasy by the admiring glance Elena's green-gold eyes shot at him, hastened to add :

"On the other hand, these millions may not come for many years ! They may not arrive until I am at death's door, and then my sister's children, here in Spain, will have a good time with the money I've worked and sweated for in America. . . ."

But Elena wanted to hear about his life in the Patagonian wilds, that immense plain swept in winter by freezing hurri-



canes that raise towering columns of dust, and the sole inhabitants of which are bands of ostriches, and straying pumas, that sometimes, under stress of hunger, risk attacking a solitary explorer.

Human population had in earlier times been represented there by scanty bands of Indians who scratched a bare living out of the river banks, and by fugitives from Chile and the Argentine, driven through these desolate regions by fear of either of the victims of their crimes, or of the law. Gradually, the small forts put up by the Government for the troops sent from Buenos Aires to take possession of the Patagonian desert, were converted into little villages, scattered about at distances of hundreds of kilometres through these wild and arid lands.

It was in one of these villages that Robledo lived, slowly transforming his workmen's camp into a town which would become, perhaps, before the end of half a century, a flourishing city. America is rich in such transformations.

Elena was listening delightedly, with the same pleasure she would have felt at the theatre or cinema, in watching an interesting story unfold.

"That's what I call living," she exclaimed. "That kind of life is worthy of a real man!"

She turned her gold-flecked eyes away from Robledo to look at her husband, almost pityingly, as if he represented all the weaknesses of a soft civilisation which she hated—for the moment!

"And that's the way to make money," she went on. "Really, the only men worth considering are those who win wars, or those who win fortunes! Even though I am a woman, I'd love a life so full of danger. . . ."

Robledo, to protect his host from the implications of the enthusiasm she was rather aggressively expressing, began to talk about the less glowing aspects of pioneering; whereupon the Marquésa admitted that her enthusiasm



for a life of adventure was somewhat chilled, and ended by confessing that she really preferred the ease and elegance of her Paris.

"But how I wish," she added, "that my husband liked that sort of thing! Conquering, by sheer force of will, some of the vast riches of this earth. . . . He would come to see me every year. I would think of him all the time he was away, and even join him out there for a few months! It would be so much more exciting than this life of ours in Paris—and then, at the end of a few years, there would be riches, real wealth, immense wealth, like that you read about, and that you so rarely see in our Old World."

She paused a moment, then added gravely, looking at Robledo:

"You, for instance, don't care so much for money. What you want is adventure, life, activity. You like to use your strength. You don't really know what money means. Men like you don't need much for themselves. Only a woman can teach men what money is worth in this world!"

She turned to look at Torre Bianca, adding:

"And yet the men who have a woman to take care of never have the forcefulness, somehow, to accomplish things the way men do when they are alone in the world. . . ."

Robledo, after this first luncheon at his friend's house, became a frequent visitor at the Torre Blancas', dropping in as informally as though he really were a member of his host's family.

"Elena likes you very much, really likes you, my dear fellow," Torre Bianca assured him; and he looked immensely relieved. It would have been so difficult if he had had to choose between his wife and his friend, as he would have had to do in case they hadn't hit it off!

Robledo, for his part, was somewhat disconcerted by



Elena. When she was present he yielded to the charm of her person, to the peculiar seductive quality that enhanced her beauty. She always treated him with a gracious familiarity, quite as though he really were her husband's brother, and took charge of initiating him in Paris society, giving him plenty of advice and information so as to prevent his being taken in by those disposed to see an advantage for themselves in his being a foreigner, and accompanying him to the fashionable resorts of the city, either at tea-time or at night, after dinner.

Her mischievous and childlike expression, her imperturbable way of looking at him, the childish lisp with which she pronounced certain words, all had a certain fascination for the engineer.

"She's a child," he told himself. "Her husband is right about that. She has all the tricks of the dolls that society turns out—and she must be fearfully expensive! But, underneath all this, there is probably a very simple woman. . . ."

When he was not with her, however, he was less optimistic about his friend's wife, and smiled somewhat ironically at the latter's credulity. Who was this woman? Where had Torre Bianca met her?

He knew concerning her only what his friend had told him. As to that distinguished functionary of the Czar's court, her deceased husband, it was difficult to gather just what the nature of his services had been, perhaps because they had been so numerous! He had, it seemed, been Grand Marshal of the court; then again, he had been merely a general. But when it came to remarkable ancestry, no one could surpass Elena's father. Torre Bianca delighted to repeat his wife's statements concerning a host of personages of the Russian court, many of them great ladies, who had added the glory of a love affair with the Emperor, to their other distinctions—yes, all these celebrities were



relatives of Elena's. He had never seen any of them because they had died a long time ago, or else they lived on their estates way off in Siberia somewhere.

Some of Elena's allusions puzzled Robledo. She had never, so she told him, been in America, yet one afternoon, as they sipped their tea at the Ritz, she mentioned her trip through San Francisco when she was a little girl. On other occasions she would mention places in remote parts of the world, or persons well known in contemporary society as though she knew them intimately; and he never succeeded in finding out how many languages she knew.

"I speak everything!" had been her answer when Robledo asked her one day how many languages she could use. And her anecdotes made him wonder. . . . She had always "heard So-and-So tell this joke"; yet the engineer had his doubts about the real source of her rather daring stories.

"Where hasn't this woman been?" he thought to himself. "Apparently she has lived a thousand lives in a few years. Can all this have happened when she was the wife of that Russian personage?"

His attempts to sound his friend on the subject of the Marquésa had only one result. They showed that Torre Bianca's confidence in his wife hedged him round with a thick wall of credulity. It was impossible to scale this wall or make the slightest breach in it. He would never discover the truth about Elena from her husband. But he did learn that since the day he had met her in London, Torre Bianca knew nothing about his wife beyond what she herself had told him.

Of course, when he married her, Federico must have seen some of the papers required for the civil ceremony. . . . But no, apparently he had not. The marriage had taken place in London, and had come off as rapidly as a film wedding. All that was needed was a minister to read the



Prayer-book, a few witnesses, and some passports and papers, probably lent for the occasion.

But after awhile Robledo grew ashamed of his suspicions. Federico seemed happy and proud of his marriage. That gave his friend little right to interfere. . . . Besides, his suspicions might very well be due to the fact that he had lived too long in the woods. He had not yet adjusted himself to the complexities of life in Paris.

Elena was a woman of elegance, a woman of the kind he had never known before. It was his class-mate's marriage which made this unexpected friendship possible. And it was very natural that he should find in this new society, things that seemed startling or even shocking. It had already happened to him on several occasions to consider as perfectly natural things that a few minutes earlier had seemed to him quite improper. Undoubtedly, it was his lack of social experience that made him so suspicious. . . . And then, at a smile from Elena, at a caressing glance of her gold-flecked green eyes, he would express a trust and an admiration in no degree inferior to her husband's.

Robledo was living near the Boulevard des Italiens in an old house which he had admired on one of his early visits to Paris. Then it had seemed to him the nearest approach to Paradise that an earthly building could make. Now, however, he left it frequently to dine with Torre Bianca and his wife. Sometimes he was their guest in their luxurious home. Sometimes he played the host at some famous Paris restaurant.

Elena was pleased to have him come to the numerous teas she gave, so that she could show him off to her friends. She took childish delight in opposing the wishes of the "Patagonian Bear," as she liked to call him, regardless of the fact that he always declared there were no bears to be found in the part of the world she attributed him to. He



detested these occasions, and Elena shamelessly resorted to *ruses* in order to get him to come.

Little by little, he met all the friends of the house who usually appeared at the formal dinners given by the Torre Blancas. Elena invariably presented him, not as an engineer whose enterprises were in their first and most precarious stages, but as one whose work was already a success, and who had returned from America well provided with millions. She took care, however, to impart this misinformation behind his back, and Robledo was somewhat at a loss to understand the profound respect with which he was treated, and the sympathetic attention with which his friends' guests turned to listen to him whenever he offered to make a remark.

The most important guests were several deputies and journalists, friends of Fontenoy, the banker. The latter was a man of middle age, clean-shaven, entirely bald, who affected the dress and manners of an American business man.

Robledo, as he looked at him, was reminded of an occasion long ago in Buenos Aires when a note was to fall due the following day, and he had not yet been able to raise the money to meet it. Fontenoy looked exactly like the popular idea of the successful man of affairs who is directing business enterprises in every quarter of the globe. Everything about him seemed calculated to inspire confidence, above all, his obvious faith in his own resourcefulness. Yet, at times, he would frown, and, plunged in silence, give the impression of being completely detached from all that surrounded him.

"He is thinking of some new combination," Torre Blanca would say to his guest. "The way that man's mind works is extraordinary!"

Yet Robledo, without quite knowing why, was again reminded of his own anxieties and those of so many others



over there in Buenos Aires when they had borrowed money at ninety days, and were facing the necessity of meeting this debt on the morrow.

As he left the Torre Blancas' one evening, Robledo started off down the Avenue Henri Martin towards the Trocadero, where he expected to take the subway. One of the guests accompanied him, a dubious-looking person, who had sat at the last seat at table, and now seemed quite happy to be walking along with a South American millionaire. He was a *protégé* of Fontenoy's and edited a business weekly, one of the banker's innumerable enterprises. A close and acid person, he seemed to expand only in those moments when he was criticising his benefactors, which was always the moment their backs were turned. At the end of a few yards he began to pay off his debt toward his host and hostess by gossiping about them. He knew, of course, that Robledo was a school friend of the Marqués.

"And have you known his wife a long time too?" he inquired, and smiled meaningly when Robledo admitted that he had first made her acquaintance a few weeks ago.

"Russian! Do you really think that she is Russian? . . . Of course, that's what she says she is, just as she says her first husband was a Marshal of the Czar's court. . . . Yet a good many people can't help wondering whether there ever was such a husband. I don't care to say anything about the truth of all this. But I do know that I have never met any Russians at the noble lady's house."

He paused to take breath, and added:

"Moreover, some of her supposed countrymen, people in a position to know what they were talking about, told me that she wasn't Russian. I've been told that she's Rumanian, by some people who claim to have seen her when she was a girl, in Bucharest—and I have heard that she was born in Italy, and that her parents were Poles. . . . Well, there you are! And it's lucky we don't have to



know the history of all the people who invite us to dinner. . . .”

Whereupon he glanced at Robledo in an attempt to discover whether he had succeeded in whetting the Spaniard's curiosity, and whether it would be safe for him to go on. . . .

“The Marqués is a good fellow enough. You must know him pretty well. Fontenoy has given him a fairly important job. He is well aware of Torre Bianca's good qualities . . .”

Robledo sensed that his escort was on the point of saying something which it would be impossible for him to accept in silence. He called to a passing taxi, murmured something about a forgotten engagement, and made haste to be rid of the spiteful sycophant.

In his conversations with Torre Bianca, the latter always took up, sooner or later, the subject that obsessed him. He needed so much money to keep up his social position.

“You have no idea how much a wife costs, my dear fellow! Winters at the Riviera, summers at fashionable watering places, trips to famous resorts in the spring and autumn, all that costs something. . . .”

Robledo always received these outbursts with expressions of sympathy; but there was an ironic note in them which exasperated Torre Bianca.

“Of course, anyone who can get along without women is free to assume that superior air of yours, my dear boy. That's what people usually do who know nothing about love. . . .”

Robledo turned white, and the smile that usually played about his lips vanished. So, he knew nothing about love. . . . Something stirred in his memory. . . .

Torre Bianca knew very little of his friend's early experiences. The Marqués had a vague impression that Robledo's sweetheart had married someone else, or maybe



she had died. . . . Anyway, something had happened, and he suspected that Robledo had, as a consequence of it, vowed never to marry. . . . Yet who would suspect that this well-fed, practical, and ironical friend of his bore a wound that the years had not yet been able to heal?

But, as though fearful that his friend might possibly think of him as "romantic," Robledo hastened to smile sceptically.

"When I want women they are not hard to find . . . and then I am free to go my way. Why complicate my life by taking into it a companion I don't need?"

As the three friends were leaving the theatre one evening, Elena expressed a desire to go to a certain Montmartre *cabaret* that was causing a stir in Paris by the magnificence of its new decorations, in the Persian style of the "Thousand and One Nights," adapted, of course, to the architectural necessities of a faubourg *cabaret*.

Green lights gave the effect of a sea-cave to the high-ceilinged room in which the crowd looked as livid as so many corpses, recent victims of the hangman's art. Two orchestras working in shifts filled the air with jerking and broken rhythms. Violins and banjos vied with indefinable instruments in the production of disharmonies, while automobile horns, drums and cymbals contributed to a pandemonium, in which heavy objects crashed on the ground, rails squeaked, and the barnyard squawked.

In an open space between tables, groups of dancers came and went. The women's dresses and hats, like rainbow-hued foam, flecked with gold, floated in and out among the black coats of the men and the white squares of the tablecloths. The orchestras shrieked, and the guests tried hard to be as noisy as the patrons of a country fair. Those who did not dance lassoed everything in sight with paper trailers, threw cotton snow-balls about, blew whistles and played with other childish toys. Multi-coloured balloons



floated on the smoke-laden air, while 'nen and women, as they ate and drank, wore paper caps of ridiculous cut, baby bonnets tied on with strings, clowns' hats and fantastic bird-crests.

A forced merriment prevailed, a desire to revert to the stammerings of babyhood, as though this would give new incentive to the monotonous sinnings of middle-age.

Elena seemed delighted with the scene.

"There's nothing like Paris, after all, is there, Robledo?" she cried.

But Robledo, the savage, smiled with an indifference magnificently insolent. The three ate and drank, though they were neither hungry nor thirsty. At every table the champagne bottles appeared, nestling in their silver pails. One might have thought them the gods of the place, in whose honour the feast was held. And always, before one bottle was empty, another took its place as though it had grown out of the frosty depths of the bucket.

Elena, who was looking about with a certain impatience, suddenly smiled and waved to a man who had just come in. It was Fontenoy, who joined them at their table.

Robledo suddenly remembered that Elena had mentioned the banker several times while they were at the theatre. Perhaps she and the banker had arranged this "chance" meeting at Montmartre?

But Fontenoy was saying to Torre Bianca:

"What a coincidence! I have just been dining with some business friends, and I thought I needed something frivolous to take my mind off my work for a little while. I might have gone to any one of a dozen other restaurants, but I just happened to drop in here—and here you all are!"

For a moment Robledo was tempted to believe that eyes can smile without the help of lips, such a mischievous and triumphant gleam flashed from Elena. But when the



champagne bottle had renewed itself three times in its silver nest, Elena began to look enviously at the dancers. Finally she exclaimed, like a petulant small girl :

“ I’d give anything to dance, and yet none of you give me an opportunity ! ”

The Marqués got up as though at an imperial command, and husband and wife threaded their way in and out among the other couples.

When they returned to their table, Elena was protesting with comic indignation :

“ Here I’ve come all the way to Montmartre to dance with my own hands . . . ! ”

With an affectionate glance at Fontenoy, she went on :

“ Of course, I wouldn’t think of expecting you to dance with me. You don’t know how, and anyway it’s too frivolous. Some of your stockholders might see you, and they’d be sure to lose confidence in you if they saw you in this sort of place.”

Turning to Robledo, she inquired :

“ Don’t you dance ? ”

The engineer pretended to be scandalised at the suggestion. Where could he have learned the modern steps ? The only ones he knew were those of the Chilian “ *cueca* ” that his *peons* always danced on pay days, or the “ *pericon* ” and the “ *gato* ” as danced by some old *gaucho* to the clatter of his spurs.

“ So I shall have to sit here ! That’s what happens when I go out with three men. . . . I never saw anything so ridiculous ! ”

But, as though he had heard what she was saying, a young man came towards their table, a young dancer whom they had often seen at well-known dance palaces. Torre Bianca made a gesture of annoyance. The fact that he had heard Elena express her admiration of the dancer had been enough to arouse his dislike.



The youth enjoyed a certain celebrity. Someone had ironically indicated to what heights of glory he had attained by calling him "the tango-god." Robledo guessed from the smallness of his feet, always encased in high-heeled shoes, and the brilliance of his thick hair, as black as Chinese lacquer, that he was a South American.

This "tango-god," who allowed his partners to pay for the dances they had with him—or so those envious of his celebrity whispered—had no difficulty in persuading Elena to accompany him to the dance floor.

Several times she came back to her place to rest, but in a few minutes her eyes would begin following the dancer, and he, as though conscious of an inaudible summons, made haste to seek her out again.

Meanwhile, Torre Bianca was not concealing his disgust. Fontenoy appeared impassive and smiled absently in those intervals Elena spent with them. But Robledo remembered the absent-minded gestures he had observed among people who have a promissory note soon falling due. . . .

He looked more attentively at the banker, who seemed absorbed in the thought of distant things. But little by little, Elena's persistence in dancing with the young South American had induced on his face an expression of annoyance quite as marked as her husband's. Yet, invariably, as she passed by in her partner's arms, she smiled mischievously at Fontenoy, as though his air of disgust delighted her.

Robledo, sitting between the two, thought to himself:

"To look at them, it would be hard to say which one looks more like a jealous husband than the other. . . ."



## CHAPTER III

THE Countess Titonius appeared one day at one of Elena's teas. The countess was a Russian lady who had married a Scandinavian nobleman, by which act she had cast him into such complete eclipse that no one could remember ever having seen him.

Well on the way toward fifty, the countess still possessed the dregs, albeit somewhat muddy, of a remote but once heady beauty. Her overflowing obesity, her white and flaccid flesh, now served as the support for a head and face much like those of a sentimental doll; and as the countess was given to writing amorous verses and reciting them to anyone within hearing, she was frequently referred to in the circles in which she moved, as "the five-hundred-weight of poetry."

Already generously *decolletée* by mid-afternoon, her gigantic and barbarous jewels adorned the hollows and rotundities of her quivering flesh, or set off the high lights of a red-gold wig for which the countess was perpetually purchasing additional curls.

For the most part her jewels were quite shamelessly false. Most worthy of respect among their number was a pearl necklace, which, whenever the countess deposited her bulk in a chair, dangled grotesquely over the protruding spheres of her opulent form. The pearls, irregular, triangular-shaped, and with root marks, resembled the shark's teeth with which the members of certain savage tribes like to adorn themselves. Gossip asserted that they were souvenirs of those lovers of her youth from whom she had been



able finally to extract nothing else. . . . It was undeniable that the countess was given to speaking with no perceptible restraint, of her innumerable tender experiences.

No sooner had the countess learned from Elena's own lips that Robledo was a millionaire fresh from the American wild, than she began casting glances of passionate interest in his direction. Tea-cup in hand, she captured him in a corner, and began a conversation to escape from which he frantically sought a pretext.

"You, who are such a traveller, such a hero, must give me the benefit of your experience. Tell me, what is your real opinion about love?"

The poetess heard the hero murmuring excuses. In spite of the tender glances of her myopic eyes, she had frightened him!

A few weeks later Elena asked him to accept an invitation to a reception at the countess's. "It will be amusing. Titonius is sure to ask her Bohemian friends, so as to have some applause for her poems.—Of course she'll read them! There'll be a lot of people there who come in the hope of meeting celebrities, and there'll be no-account artists, and youths convinced that they have achieved immortality because they've succeeded in collecting a train of admirers, or get their things published in the columns of some wretched little sheet that nobody reads. You ought to see all those absurd people! There isn't another house like that one in Paris. Anyway, I promised the countess that you would come, and I'll be cross if you don't!"

To keep the peace, Robledo betook himself at ten o'clock one evening to the house of Mme. Titonius on the Avenue Kleber, having fortified himself beforehand by dining with some South American friends at one of the Boulevard restaurants.

Two servants, hired for the occasion, were helping the guests out of their overcoats. The mixture of various



social groups that Elena had foreseen was noticeable even in the ante-room. Side by side with guests of distinguished appearance, accustomed to the life of the drawing room, he noticed youths with leonine locks, whose formal evening dress was revealed only when they slid out of threadbare coats with tattered linings. He caught the contemptuous expression of the servants as they collected these coats as well as certain fur wraps grown bald in spots, from ladies who, on emerging from these coverings, displayed the most extravagant of head-dresses.

An old fellow, whose whiskers, of a dirty white, and whose wide slouch hat made him look like the popular conception of a poet, threw off his summer overcoat and the woollen mufflers wound about him. Taking his pipe out of his mouth, he struck it on the heel of his shoe, and put it in his overcoat pocket.

“Take good care of that, now,” he said to the servant.

Robledo’s fur coat inspired respect in the attendants. One of them, after helping its owner out of it, kept it on his arm.

“You’ve taken a fancy to it?” the engineer enquired.

Paying no attention to his jesting tone, the fellow replied :

“I’ll just lay it aside, sir . . . because some one might make a mistake, that they might, going away from here. . . .”

And with a gesture at the mound of unsightly coverings, he winked at Robledo.

The sight of the American “millionaire” in her own drawing-room aroused great enthusiasm in the poetess. Scattering the guests to right and left, she plunged through the throng to meet him, grasped him by both hands, and leaning on his arm, bore him along with her, presenting him to her friends. Her eyes dwelt on him, proudly as though he were the chief attraction of the occasion.

Only the day before, Elena had given him due warning.



“Take care! The countess is enamoured of you, and kidnapping is quite in her line. . . .”

But now the poetess, in a veritable avalanche of words, was giving vent to her enthusiasm as she introduced the American.

“A hero,” she was exclaiming, “a Superman from the pampas, where he has hunted lions, tigers, and even elephants. . . .”

Robledo looked alarmed at these fantastic improvisations, but the countess was far beyond geographic scruples.

“When you tell me all about your wonderful deeds, perhaps I shall write a poem about them, an epic, in the modern style, of course, telling the adventures of your remarkable life. Men are only interesting to me when they are heroes. . . .”

Again Robledo wore a look of alarm.

As, for the moment, there chanced to be no one near at hand to whom she could present her distinguished guest, the countess conducted him to a small room into which no one had yet wandered, perhaps because the odours drifting in through a *portière* betokened the close proximity of the kitchen.

Sitting down in an arm-chair as wide as a throne, she bade Robledo be seated. But when he looked around for a chair, the Countess Titonius pointed to a low stool near her feet.

“That will be more intimate,” she declared. “You will look like a page of olden times at the feet of his lady.”

Robledo could not altogether conceal his dismay at these words, but he obediently followed his hostess’s directions, although his own generous proportions were something of an obstacle.

The countess, meanwhile, was imitating Elena’s childish gestures and lisping speech with rather grotesque effect.

“Now that we are alone,” she was saying, “I hope you



will speak freely with me. I am going to ask you the same question as before. What do you really think of love?"

Robledo, quite overwhelmed, murmured something about love being a disease from which the human race has been suffering for thousands of years, without growing any the wiser about its cause and cure.

The countess was now very close to him, scanning him with her short-sighted eyes to which she held her shell-handled lorgnette. Leaning down over her vast girth, her cheek almost touched that of the man seated at her feet.

"And do you think that I shall ever find a soul to understand my own—so misunderstood?" she was asking him.

Robledo was quite calm as he replied gravely:

"Oh, I am sure of it. You are still young, and have plenty of time. . . ."

The words threw the countess Titonius into such ecstatic rapture that she could not restrain herself from caressing her companion's cheek with the tip of her lorgnette.

"Spanish gallantry!" she sighed. "But we must part! Let us keep our secret from the eyes of a world which cannot understand. . . . Yes, I can read your eyes. Our souls shall meet again, more intimately . . . but now my social duties call. Once more, I am nothing but a hostess."

Rising from her arm-chair throne with all the ponderous weight of her bulk, she went away, attempting as she did so, to move with the light step of a young girl. She did not forget to throw Robledo a kiss from the end of her lorgnette.

Disconcerted by this episode, and somewhat annoyed by being placed in so grotesque a position, he also left the room.

On his way back to the drawing-room he stumbled upon a man of small stature, who, in spite of having suffered a rude blow in the collision, meekly murmured his apologies. Later, Robledo saw him again, wandering timidly about,



watching the servants, and at the same time looking as though he were asking their pardon for doing so, and pushing the furniture that had been disarranged back to its place. Whenever anyone spoke to him he made haste to answer with abject politeness, and then fled precipitately.

The countess, meanwhile, had gathered a group of men about her—for the most part long-haired individuals—of those Robledo had noticed in the cloak-room. Many of the women guests were openly making fun of their hostess, raising their eyebrows at one another with a gesture the meaning of which was not hard to guess. The old fellow who had left his muffler and his pipe in the coat-room announced solemnly :

“ We respectfully request that our beautiful Muse recite one of her poems ! ”—at which there was much applause, and many approving nods. But the Muse showed herself to be intractable, and began to move this way and that in her chair, shaking her head. In a weak tone, as though suddenly ill, she murmured :

“ No, my friends, I cannot . . . to-night ; it is impossible . . . some other time, perhaps. . . . ”

Her admirers grew insistent, and the countess was forced to repeat her refusals, her voice constantly fainter. Finally, her guests abandoned her for livelier diversions, and turning their backs on the suffering Muse, promptly forgot her.

Scarcely had a young musician, clean-shaven and with flowing locks, who strove to imitate the genial ugliness of certain modern composers, sat down at the piano, and run his fingers over the keyboard, when two girls made a dash for him, put out their hands to his shoulder, and implored—they would love to hear his wonderful compositions—but later ! Now he must be indulgent, and come down to the level of the crowd, and play something for them to dance to. Oh, a waltz would do, if artistic principles stood in the way of his playing one of the American dances.



Several couples began to circle round the room and were rapidly joined by others. Suddenly noticing that no one was left to pay court to her, the countess looked about in bewilderment, then rose, saying with indulgent condescension :

“ Since you really want to hear me, I’ll do as you insist. I’ll recite a short poem.”

Consternation ! The pianist, however, not having heard the countess’s surrender, went on playing, until the meek, anonymous gentleman, whom Robledo had noticed trotting about repairing the disorder caused by the guests, came up to him and grasped his hands. The music ceased, the couples stopped short, and finally, with a bored expression, found chairs. The countess began. . . .

Staring, in an attempt to appear attentive, blinking, in an attempt to repel the advances of sleep, yawning, or sunk in blank immobility, her victims sat or lolled about. Two of the women, livelier than the rest, were feigning great interest in the recitation. One of them went so far as to put a hand behind her ear in order to hear better. A running conversation was going on, however, behind their fans, which they dropped to their laps now and then when they needed both hands for the patter of applause. But they caught them up quickly to conceal their laughter. The countess was entertaining them so much better than she knew !

Robledo chanced to be standing behind them. Leaning against the door-jamb, he was half hidden by the hangings. The countess, meanwhile, was declaiming with increasing fervour, so that, in order to carry on their conversation, the two women had to raise their voices.

“ Instead of stuffing us with poetry, I wish she’d give us a decent supper,” one of them was saying.

The other protested. The countess set a table that was dangerous, but certainly plentiful. Only the brave, not to say reckless, accepted her dinner invitations, for on these



occasions the countess herself prepared the courses. "And, my *dear*, by the time you reach dessert, you're lucky if you only have to 'phone for the doctor instead of the undertaker!"

Frequently interrupted by their own laughter, they rehearsed the countess's history. She had once been rich; some attributed this past wealth to her parents' fortune, others to the fortunes—and fortune—of her lovers. Her marriage with the Count Titonius had provided her with a title and the most insignificant of husbands, a fellow who, ruined by a stupid speculation, tossed up a coin to see whether he should blow out his brains or marry the countess. And now, in her establishment, he occupied a position quite inferior to that of the servants. When the countess's nerves were in a state of tension because of the infidelity of some one of her youthful *protégés*, it was her habit to throw all the count's shirts and underwear over the banisters, after which with the air of an injured queen she would order him to leave her presence for ever.

A few days later, however, when the poetess was giving another party, the outcast would reappear, meek and sad, and shrinking, as though fearful of occupying too much space in his wife's rooms.

"I can't imagine," the other was saying, "why she persists in giving these receptions, when the woman is ruined! For instance, on the table out there where we'll have supper in a little while, you'll see large pastry pieces and hot-house fruits—hired, my *dear*, hired for the evening—just like the servants. Everyone knows it, and no one dares take any of these show pieces, the countess would be so furious. So all we'll get will be tea and cakes, and we'll have to pretend that's all we want!"

They stopped a moment to applaud the countess, who was emboldened by her apparent success to begin declaiming a new poem.



Robledo, as little interested in the malicious gossipings of these two women as in his hostess's recitations, took advantage of a moment during which the countess was bowing to his audience, to leave the drawing-room and make his way to the alcove which had been the scene of his romantic passage with the poetess.

The meek and obsequious gentleman he had stumbled against earlier in the evening was now stretched out on the divan, smoking, and looking much like a labourer enjoying a few minutes of rest. He had been watching the spirals of smoke from his cigarette unroll in the heavy air, but when Robledo sat down near him, he felt it incumbent upon him to smile at the stranger. In a few moments he inquired :

"Are you bored to death?"

Robledo looked sharply at him before he answered.

"And you?"

The little man nodded sadly, and Robledo made a gesture which plainly said, "Let's clear out, shall we?"

But the little man's eyes seemed to reply: "If I only could!"

"You are living here in the house?" inquired Robledo finally.

And the little man replied breathlessly, with a jerk of his head and arms :

"This is my house. I am the countess's husband. . . ."

After this revelation, Robledo thought it discreet to retire. Putting the cigar he had been about to light back in his pocket, he returned to the drawing-room.

A great burst of applause met his ears. The poetess had stopped! And convinced that she would recite no more that evening, her admirers were expressing some of their delight, while the countess grasped the hands of the friends about her, and mopped her damp brow, murmuring :

"I shall die. . . . Such emotion. . . . I am in a



fever. . . . Art is like that. You shouldn't have made me recite. . . ."

Looking about as though searching for some one, she caught sight of Robledo and made for him.

"Your arm, Hero of the Pampas! You shall lead me out to supper!"

The guests, for the most part, made no attempt to conceal their joy as the door of the dining-room opened. There was a general rush for the buffet, some of the guests elbowing and trampling the others.

Leaning on her escort's arm, the countess was gazing at him with passionate eyes.

"Did you pay special attention to my poem, 'The Rosy Dawn of Love'? Do you know whom I was thinking of as I recited those verses?"

Robledo turned away. A laugh was about to escape. . . .

"How could I guess, countess? I've lived in the desert so long, I'm nothing but a savage!"

The guests were crowding around the table, casting hungrily admiring glances at the examples of the pastry-cook's art that occupied its centre, surrounded by pyramids of enormous fruit. The cakes and sandwiches looked pathetically insignificant beside them! The two servants who had been in charge of the cloak-room, and a butler, resplendent with a silver watch-chain across his waistcoat, and side whiskers that made him look like an old diplomat, were defending the pastry edifice in the centre of the table, condescending to hand out only the trifles on its periphery; cups of tea or chocolate, small glasses of liqueurs, sandwiches, and cakes.

The old fellow of the mufflers, whom the countess hailed as "*cher maître*," was trying vainly to make the servant understand that he wished him to deposit some of the *pièce de résistance* or at least some of the fruit on the empty plate he was frantically extending. But the servant looked at



him with a shocked expression, as though he were requesting something scarcely decent, and finally, after handing him a cake and a sandwich, turned his back upon him.

Robledo, standing near the table, found himself close to the hired "pieces" that the servants were so conscientiously defending. The countess had dropped his arm for the moment, to reply to congratulations on her remarkable reading. Relieved at being left to his own devices for a few minutes, he examined the table critically, and while the butler and his acolytes were attending to the needs of the crowd, he picked up a plate and knife and tranquilly carved a piece out of the most majestic of the pastries. He even had time to take one of the ruddy pears from the showy mounds of fruit, and cut it in two. But just as he was about to eat it, the mistress of the house, free for a moment from her admirers, turned an amorous glance in his direction, only to see a breach in the pastry edifice, and a handsome piece of fruit, ruthlessly sliced, on the barbarian's plate. . . .

A great change occurred in the sentiments of the poetess. At first she looked shocked, as though witnessing an act which transgressed all consecrated usages. Then came indignation, and finally rage. . . . It was she who would have to pay for this stupid destruction. . . . And she had believed for a moment that she had found—in this savage—a hero-soul worthy of her own !

Abruptly leaving her "Patagonian Bear," she sought out the pianist who, circling round and round the table, was pleading with one servant after another for sandwiches and a little more wine. . . .

"Give me your arm, friend Beethoven !" With a dramatic gesture she continued :

"One of these days I shall write a libretto for this young man, and then there'll be a little less talk about Wagner !"

She took him along with her to the drawing-room, now deserted, and made him sit down at the piano, while in



clarion tones she declaimed to an accompaniment of arpeggios. But nothing could tempt her guests from the dining-room. They remained clustered round the table, maintaining, however, the group distinctions which all Mme. Titonius's efforts at Bohemian *camaraderie* were powerless to break down.

Robledo caught a glimpse through the crowd of the Marqués de Torre Bianca and his wife, who had just come in, having spent the earlier part of the evening at another party. He noticed that Elena was talking mechanically, murmuring phrases that had no meaning, as though she were thinking of something else. Convinced that his chatter annoyed her, he went off in search of Federico, from whom he obtained little attention for the reason that the Marqués was very busy describing to someone he had just met the important undertakings that his friend Fontenoy was engaged in, in various parts of the globe.

Bored, and not yet quite clear as to the reason for his hostess's sudden desertion, he sank into a large armchair, and almost at the same instant heard someone talking behind him. Not the two women gossips this time, but a man and a woman, who, seated on a divan, were repeating the same things he had overheard before, as though no two guests in that house could do anything else but gossip about the countess. He paid little attention to what they were saying until suddenly he heard the name Torre Bianca. The woman was saying :

"Did you ever see such jewels? Of course, everyone knows that neither she nor her husband had to work hard to get them. Everyone knows that Fontenoy pays for all those little luxuries."

The man had a different version.

"I was told that those jewels were paste, as paste as those of our poetical countess. The Torre Biancas kept the money the banker gave them to pay for the real gems,



or else they sold the real ones and had these substitutes made."

The woman sighed at the banker's name.

"That man is nearly bankrupt—everybody says so! And some go so far as to talk about court proceedings and a prison sentence. What a bloodthirsty creature that Russian woman must be!"

The man laughed sceptically.

"Russian? There are people who knew her when she was a girl in Vienna, singing in music-halls. Also some one in diplomatic circles told me that she is Spanish, of an English father. No one knows her nationality; she doesn't know it herself. . . ."

Robledo got up from his chair. He couldn't very well listen to any more such talk without speaking. But just as he was leaving the room he heard a double exclamation of surprise coming from behind him.

"Here is Fontenoy! How strange to see him here! He never comes, for fear the countess will ask him for a loan. . . . Something unusual must be going on!"

Robledo recognised Fontenoy in one of the groups. He was just at that moment bowing to the Torre Blancas. Robledo noticed that he was smiling, and seemed as serene as usual. More than that, he had lost his usual abstracted air that always made him look as though he were thinking of a note due the next day. He seemed calmer and more confident than Robledo had ever seen him look; in fact, the only remarkable thing about his manner was the exceptional affability with which he greeted the people about him.

From afar the Spaniard watched him and noticed a brief glance that passed between him and Elena. Whereupon the banker, with a slightly bored expression, left the group he had been with and slowly made his way to the small room that had witnessed the scene between Robledo and the Countess.



As he went towards it, he absently pressed the hands held out in greeting and in the hope of capturing him for a moment's conversation. "Happy to see you here," he murmured, and passed on.

Forcing to his lips his habitual smile of kindly protection, he nodded to Robledo, but scarcely had he done so when the smile vanished.

For in that moment the two men had faced one another, and Fontenoy saw something in the Spaniard's expression which made him drop his smiling mask. His own soul seemed to be looking out at him from those eyes. . . .

That glance, rapid as it was, he would never forget, thought the Spaniard. He and this man scarcely knew one another, and yet there had been in Fontenoy's eyes an expression of complete trust, as though he were showing him, in that brief moment, all that he had ever thought and felt.

Then he saw Elena skilfully making her way, without appearing to do so, towards the same room. A curiosity of which he was ashamed pricked him. He had no right to take part in the affairs of these two people. At the same time, it was impossible for him to be indifferent to the unwonted event which, he knew intuitively, was even then about to occur. . . .

The banker must have found it urgently necessary to speak to Elena—only this supposition could explain his seeking her at the countess's. . . . What were those two saying to one another. . . . ?

Pretending to be absorbed in reflection, he passed by the door. . . . Elena and Fontenoy stood talking; their lips scarcely moved as they faced one another standing very straight, as though they had resolved that no one must guess, from the curves of their lips, what they were saying. . . .

Fontenoy's rapid glance at him made him regret his



curiosity; for this glance moved him as the other had done. It told him so plainly that the man who was looking at him in this fashion was passing through one of the most critical moments of his life. He could almost believe that there was a reproach in his eyes. . . . "Why does what happens to me interest you if you cannot help me? . . . ."

So he did not walk past the door again. But yielding to an unexplainable impulse that was stronger than his will, he remained close to it, listening. . . . No, his conduct was not gentlemanly. He was behaving like any one of those scandal-mongers he had been over-hearing. Apparently, his surroundings were demoralising him. . . .

It wasn't easy to catch what those two people on the other side of the door were saying . . . . In one of the rooms the guests were dancing, in another some one was pounding a piano. . . . But a few confused words reached him. Fontenoy and Elena were speaking louder now; perhaps because the noise of the piano bothered them, perhaps because of increasing tenseness. . . .

"Why waste words in dramatic phrases?"—it was Fontenoy's voice. "You couldn't go away! That is for me to do—that is the only thing I can do!"

The noise made by the dancers and the pianist filled the eavesdropper's ears. But as the musician grew more merciful he caught the words another voice was saying, Elena's voice, sounding as though it came from a long weary distance. . . .

"Perhaps you are right. Oh, money! money! For people like us who know what it means in our lives, what a horror to be without it!"

Shame of his spying overtook Robledo, driving out the curiosity which had for the moment controlled him. If these two people had sought one another out, it was for him to respect their secret. Anyway, the mystery would be short-lived. Perhaps it would not last through the evening. . .



Going back to the dining room, he found Federico there, still engaged in conversation with his new acquaintance, an old gentleman who displayed the rosette of the Legion of Honour in his button-hole and looked like a retired Government functionary.

Federico had at last terminated his extensive description of Fontenoy's enterprises, and the old gentleman was saying :—

“ I haven't the slightest doubt whatever of your friend's integrity, but I should think twice before putting any money into his schemes. It strikes me that he takes unnecessary risks, that he invests his funds too far from home. Maybe everything will be all right, at least as long as he holds the confidence of the shareholders. But I am not so sure that even at the present moment he isn't losing it. And on the day when the shareholders decide that they want figures and facts instead of fine hopes, on the day when Fontenoy has to show just where he stands in his business, well, on that day, I am not so sure. . . . I am not so sure. . . . ”



## CHAPTER IV.

THE warm spring-like day, coming in mid-winter, delighted Robledo as he left his hotel after a hurried breakfast. It was late, and the waiters, the only occupants of the dining room, had not proved inspiring company. And all the while he had been sleeping and eating, a filmy, sun-saturated mist had been hovering, a golden caress, over Paris . . . .

"It's good to be alive this morning," he thought as he wandered through the Bois, feasting his eyes on the olive-browns of its winter colouring. At dusk he made his way back to the Boulevards. He would dine, he decided, and then look up the Torre Blancas, and ask them to come out with him to some place of amusement.

Happening to stop at a café, he bought a newspaper, and even before opening it, had the premonition that in this sheet, fresh from the press, there was something that would startle him. In some obscure way he felt that he was about to learn things that, until that moment, had been vague and mysterious . . . . And, as though he had known about it beforehand, his eyes immediately fell on the headlines : "*Banker Commits Suicide.*"

He did not need to read the suicide's name to know who it was. Of course it was Fontenoy ! There were the details, quite as he expected them to be, as though they had all been previously revealed to him.

"In his luxurious apartment . . . on the bed . . . the revolver still in his hand . . . Fontenoy . . . ."

Already the day before rumours of his failure had been circulated in financial circles, where it was also stated that he would be prosecuted. His shareholders had lodged a complaint against him and the examining judge was expected to look through his books that very day ; all of



which seemed to foreshadow the immediate arrest of the banker.

Robledo read again the paragraph of the article, in which it was stated that Fontenoy had deceived the people who entrusted their money to him, that his mining and other enterprises in Asia and Africa were little better than dream projects, capable of development perhaps, but by no means actually producing, as Fontenoy had represented. The article, furthermore, went on to suggest that the banker was more of a visionary than a criminal, which of course didn't at all do away with the fact that he had ruined a great many people. Moreover, it appeared that he had appropriated considerable sums for his personal expenditure, "*and responsibility for the disaster will undoubtedly involve some of his associates.*"

The article ended by prophesying, not only the banker's arrest, but that of whoever held important positions in his company.

Robledo's thoughts turned abruptly from the suicide to his friend. What was to become of Federico? He ordered the taxi driver to take him to the Avenue Henri Martin.

The butler received him with a funereal air, as though there had been a death in the house. No, the Marqués was not at home. He had gone out at noon, when someone telephoned him about the suicide, and hadn't yet come in.

"And Madame la Marquésa" continued the servant, "is quite ill, and can see no one."

Robledo, as he listened to the fellow, was able to judge of the commotion caused in the house by the banker's death. The icy and solemn demeanour of the servants had vanished. Now they looked like the shivering crew of a doomed ship waiting for the final crash that will throw them into the sea. Robledo heard whisperings and furtive steps behind the *portières*, and hands pulled them aside and curious eyes peered out at him.



Evidently, in the servants' quarters, there had been much talk about what was going on, and about the probable arrival of the police. Every time the door bell rang, they were expected. In a tone of suppressed rage the chauffeur kept saying to his companions below stairs :

"So the captain couldn't think of anything to do but put a bullet through his head ! Well, this ship is going down, I tell you ! Who's going to pay us our wages ? "

Robledo returned to the centre of the city for dinner, and called up Torre Bianca several times during the course of it.

At nearly twelve o'clock the butler replied that his master had just come in, and Robledo hurried back to his friend's home.

He found Federico in the library. The latter had aged over-night as though the last few hours had been so many years. Impulsively Torre Bianca embraced his friend, turning instinctively to him for support.

The poor Marqués was not only startled, he was bewildered. Never had he lived through so many emotions in so short a space of time. That morning, like Robledo, he had felt the confidence and pleasure that the golden beauty of the day inspired. What a pleasure to be alive ! . . . And then the summons of the telephone, the ghastly news, the rush to Fontenoy's apartment, the sight of his friend's body on the bed ; and the grisly crowd a violent death always assembles for that matter that seems so grotesquely insignificant before the reality of death—the autopsy. . . .

Even more painful were his impressions at Fontenoy's office. There he found a judge installed in full possession of all the banker's effects, examining papers, affixing seals, making out an inventory, coldly, suspiciously, implacably. The secretary—it was he who had notified Torre Bianca—was making valiant efforts to conceal his terror.

"We aren't going to get out of this so easily," he said,



manfully trying to face the facts that had come so uncomfortably near. And then, as a concession to his fears, he added: "The boss ought to have paid us off. . . ."

Torre Bianca spent the rest of the day looking up the people who had, in various ways, been associated with Fontenoy. Many of them had been receiving handsome salaries, for sitting on the board of directors, taking their orders, of course, from the man who paid them. Now they were thoroughly frightened, and Torre Bianca saw that, to save their skins, they would not hesitate to lie about him or anyone else who might be found to serve as a scapegoat. . . .

They lost no time in making out their case against him.

"You signed those reports stating that the business was all right. Of course, you must have seen those foreign concerns with your own eyes, otherwise you'd have no right to affix your name to the technical reports that were used to win our confidence. . . ."

Yes, it was quite plain to Torre Bianca that all these people were going to look for some one who was still alive on whom to throw all the odium of a scandalous confidence-game, since Fontenoy had eluded them.

"Manuel," he said to his friend that evening, "I'm scared! And the worst of it is that now I myself can't understand why I signed those accursed reports! They didn't seem to me so particularly important. . . . How could I possibly have such blind faith in what Fontenoy was doing?"

Robledo smiled sadly. He knew who was responsible for this "blind faith"; but he concluded that it would be cruel to add to his friend's distress by giving him his views on that subject.

Even in the midst of his tormenting anxieties, Torre Bianca was thinking more of his wife's distress than of his own.

"Poor Elena! I've just been up to talk to her. . . . She nearly collapsed when I told her I had seen Fontenoy



this morning. . . . The whole thing has been such a shock that her nerves are all unstrung."

Robledo grew impatient of his friend's concern for Elena's health. He broke out brusquely :

"You'd better think about your own situation and stop bothering about your wife. You've got more than a matter of 'nerves' to face."

Little by little, as they discussed the affair, both men began to feel more hopeful. Familiarity with misfortune invariably robs it of its terrors. There was no need, they decided, to despair, until the banker's affairs had been thoroughly investigated. Fontenoy was far more of a visionary than a crook : even his worst enemies admitted it. And it was more likely that some of the enterprises he had planned and started would turn out to be good investments. He had been wrong, of course, in trying to hurry them up, and in giving the public to understand that they were far more developed and remunerative than they actually were. But a few competent managers could find a way to make them productive ; and that would justify Fontenoy's statements, and prove that Torre Bianca had done nothing out of the way in signing them in his capacity of engineering expert.

"Yes, perhaps it will all be straightened out," said Robledo, who felt that it was wise to cheer up his friend as much as possible. Torre Bianca's distress of mind had considerably alarmed him, and he believed that only by recovering a certain amount of confidence in himself could he face the immediate future. The man needed to think clearly, and for that he must have a good night's rest.

"You'll see a turn for the better as soon as the first flurry is over, Federico ! Only, for God's sake, don't pay any attention to whatever Fontenoy's parasites advise you to do, for they're in a panic !"

As soon as Robledo got up the next day he sent for the



newspapers. One glance at their headlines showed him only too plainly that Fontenoy's suicide was assuming the proportions of a public scandal. It was intimated that several persons well-known in society were threatened with arrest within forty-eight hours, and in one of the papers he thought he discerned allusions to Torre Bianca, in a somewhat vague sentence about a certain engineer, "reputed to be a *protégé* of the banker's."

When he returned to Torre Bianca's he found the Marqués nervously scanning the newspapers in the library.

"They want to put me in jail," said the latter dolefully. He looked old and broken, but curiously resigned.

"And yet I never hurt anyone," he went on. "I can't understand why they come after me."

Robledo tried to cheer him up a bit, but without success.

"And see what it's done to me! I never in my life feared a living soul, and now I can't stand having anyone look at me! Even when the butler speaks to me I have to look away . . . . Heaven only knows what they're saying about me in the servants' quarters!"

As though he had shrunk back from the painful present to his childhood, he added timidly and with pathetic humility:

"I'm afraid to go out. I'm afraid of seeing all those people I've met so often in this drawing-room and that, because if I met them I'd have to stop and explain what I've done—and then they would look at me sceptically, or worse than that, they would say they were sorry for me, without meaning it!"

He stopped, and after a pause, he exclaimed:

"Elena is much braver than I! This morning, after seeing the newspapers, she ordered the automobile. I don't know where she was going—probably to see some of those people. She said I ought to defend myself against all these accusations. But what defence have I? I can't



pretend that I didn't sign reports about business I knew nothing about. "I can't lie about it!"

Robledo tried in vain to make him feel less hopeless. His optimism had collapsed under the attacks made upon it.

"Elena believes as you do, that everything will come out all right. She is so confident in her power that she never gives up. Of course, she has a lot of friends in Paris; people who knew her family in Russia. She went away this morning vowing that she would run down my enemies and all their machinations . . . . She thinks I have a lot of them and that they will use this Fontenoy business to destroy me. . . . And it's true that she knows much more than I do about everything; it wouldn't surprise me if she succeeded in making the newspapers and even the judge change their tone, and stop talking about proceedings and a prison sentence!"

It hadn't been easy for him to bring out that word!

"A prison sentence! What do you think of a Torre Bianca in jail, Manuel? No, that's something that shouldn't be allowed to happen. And there is always a way to avoid that!"

As though all his race had awakened in him at the threat of public disgrace, he suddenly regained his former nervous and vibrant energy. But Robledo, startled by the cold gleam like the glitter of drawn steel, that flashed from his friend's eyes, exclaimed:

"You aren't thinking of anything so foolish, Federico! After all, life is the best thing we've got. Death doesn't solve anything . . . and anyway, who knows? Perhaps you are right about Elena. Perhaps she will be able to influence the outcome of this affair. . . . "It isn't so improbable!"

As he left the house, Robledo noticed several persons in the reception room. . . . The butler murmured to him confidentially:

"They're waiting for Madame la Marquésa, sir. I told them the Master was out."



His manner made it quite plain that these were people who had come to collect the money owing to them.

What little credit the Torre Blancas still possessed had vanished at the banker's suicide. All the trades-people knew that Fontenoy was paying most of the bills of the establishment; and obviously, since the Marqués' income came from his employment in Fontenoy's office, that too had been cut off.

It was clear to Robledo now that he always found the Marqués in the library because that was his refuge. . . . He was afraid; he was afraid of even the people in his own house. . . .

Later that day he called Torre Blanca up. Elena had just come in, and seemed pleased with the results of her expedition.

"She thinks," confided the Marqués over the telephone, "that the blow isn't going to fall right away—that she has gained time, and that's everything!"

That evening Robledo went back to the Avenue Henri Martin. He had found nothing in the evening papers to justify Torre Blanca's comparative tranquillity. The allusions to the probable arrest of well-known personages continued, and there was a considerable expenditure of rhetoric about the scandalous and sensational failure.

When he found copies of the same newspapers he had just finished reading lying about on Torre Blanca's library table, he was prepared to find the Marqués dispirited and anxious. There was an odd discrepancy between Federico's voice, which was calm and odd, and the tenseness of his features. Evidently, he had resolved to place all his hopes in the possible results of Elena's attempts to influence public opinion in his favour. In other words, he admitted that only a miracle could save him. And if the miracle did not occur. . . .

Robledo looked about him, staring at the desk, the book-



shelves. Was there a revolver in that room? Had his friend prepared to this extent for a fatal emergency?

"Are there some people out there?" Torre Bianca asked.

As he seemed to be well aware of the annoying callers who had waited throughout the day in the reception hall, Robledo did not ask him to account for his question, but merely shook his head. The Marqués, however, was determined to speak of that invading throng of creditors rushing in on him from all parts of Paris.

"They smell death," he said. "They are alighting on this house like a flock of crows. . . . When Elena came in this afternoon, the hall was full of them. But she is wonderful! No one can resist her when she chooses to exert her power over people. She simply talked to them. . . and they went away quite satisfied. If she had asked them for a loan, I believe they would have given it to her."

He was so proud, for the moment, of his wife's seductive charm! But reality soon thrust itself upon his attention.

"They will come back," he added mournfully. "They have gone away, but they will come back to-morrow. It's true that Elena saw certain influential friends of hers to-day, people who can affect the policy of the papers, and the courts. They all promised to help her, but, as soon as Elena leaves them, it is no longer the same. . . . I don't doubt that they were perfectly sincere in what they said to her. But, after all, what can a woman do against so many enemies? Besides, I ought not to allow my wife to go about defending me while I stay locked up here! I know what a woman is exposing herself to when she asks men for their help. No, I'd rather go to jail. . . ."

Only a moment ago he had been intimidated by the thought of his creditors, much as a child is frightened by the thought of bogeys; and now, the idea that Elena might be exposing herself to all sorts of risks on his account



brought a flash to his eyes ; he straightened up as though galvanised by a stream of nervous energy.

" I forbade her making these calls, even though the people she went to see are old friends of her family's. . . . There are certain things a man can't allow a woman to do. . . How can I let Elena ask people to help me ? No, I'm going to trust to fate, and take what comes ! And after all, unless a man's a coward there's always one solution to the problem."

Robledo had been listening patiently. He understood his friend ; and gravely he replied :

" I know a better solution than yours, Federico. Come back to Argentina with me ! "

Calmly and methodically, as though he were explaining a matter of business or an engineering project, he told Torre Bianca what he wanted him to do.

It was absurd to hope that Fontenoy's affairs, hopelessly tangled by his suicide, could be straightened out ; and moreover it was dangerous to remain in Paris. " I am aware, besides, of what you are planning to do to-morrow, perhaps even to-night, if you begin thinking that there is no way out. You'll lay your revolver beside you on the desk, write two letters, one to your wife, one to your mother. Your mother ! That will be her reward for all that she has done for you ! You will leave her to face the world alone by rushing out of it to save your own hide. . . . "

Torre Bianca listened with lowered head. His mother and all the Torre Biancas seemed to be looking at him reproachfully . . .

Suddenly he looked up. " Do you think that it would be easier for my mother to see me in jail ? "

" You don't have to go to jail to avoid committing suicide. What I ask you to do is this. Trust yourself to me for a little while. Do as I tell you, without wasting any time in argument. We must come to a decision."



Knowing that Federico was as conscious of the newspapers on the table as he was, he went on :

"In my opinion, you were not going to get out of this mess if you stay here. On the contrary ! So, to-morrow we'll start for South America. Out in Patagonia you can get an engineering job and work with me. What do you say?"

But Torre Bianca remained impassive, as though he didn't understand, or as though he thought the suggestion too absurd to deserve an answer. His silence annoyed Robledo.

"I am thinking, of course, of the fact that you signed documents without knowing whether the statements in them were true or not."

"I can think of nothing else," replied the Marqués. "That is why I have decided that the only thing I can do. . . ."

Robledo could not contain his annoyance. Walking up and down, he answered, and his voice sounded very loud :

"I won't have you die, you old fool ! You're taking your orders from me now ! Pretend, if you like, that I'm your father—no, your mother, rather. Look upon me as your poor old mother. She wants you to obey her, Federico, by doing what I tell you !"

His friend's vehemence made its impression on the Marqués. He covered his eyes with his hands and sat, head bowed, in silence. Using the advantage he had gained, Robledo went on, with something that was far more difficult to say :

"I'll get you out of here ; you can rely on that, and we'll go together to America. You can begin life all over again there. It will be hard work, but you'll find a satisfaction in it that you never knew in this old world. And perhaps, after going through a lot of hardship, you will become rich. But, in order to accomplish all this, Federico, you must come to America . . . alone. . . ."



The Marqués started up from his chair. He looked at his friend with pained surprise. "Alone?" Did Robledo dare suggest that he must abandon Elena? Why, death was preferable! What torture, to wonder every moment what was becoming of her! . . .

But Robledo, thoroughly irritated now, as always, by being opposed, exclaimed:

"Oh, Elena! Elena is——"

A glance at the Marqués made him drop his hostile tone.

"Elena is largely to blame for the situation you are in to-day, my friend! It was through her that you knew Fontenoy, and so, more or less directly, it was through her that you came to sign statements that mean nothing less than your professional disgrace."

Federico shrunk away, but Robledo went on mercilessly:

"How did your wife happen to know Fontenoy, anyway? You told me he was a friend of her family's, but was that all you knew about him?"

For a moment he restrained himself only to burst out angrily:

"Women always know about us, and of them we know only what they choose to tell us. . . ."

The Marqués looked confused. What was Robledo saying?

"I don't know what you mean," he said finally. "But if you are talking about my wife, please remember that she bears my name, and that . . . I am very fond of her. . . ."

In the pause that followed a distance, increasing with the minutes, separated the two men. Robledo made a determined effort to renew the cordiality of their relations.

"Life over there is hard. We are very far from having even the most ordinary comforts of civilisation. But the desert is a great sea of energy that cleanses and strengthens those of us who go to it refugees from the old world, or from ourselves. A plunge into it prepares us for a new kind of



life, a life such as you know nothing of. You find there men who have escaped from all sorts of catastrophes, men from everywhere. Yet all differences of race, birth and breeding are washed away. Only the fundamentals remain. There, men show themselves for what they are, the strength that is in them freed from all the bonds that entangle you here. . . . And that is why I call my country what it really is—‘the land of all the world.’ It is waiting for us, Federico ! ”

But the Marqués appeared unmoved.

“ And what is waiting for you here ? Perhaps public disgrace or prison, or even that most stupid of deaths, suicide. But there you will learn to know hope again, hope, the best thing in our lives ! Are you coming with me ? ”

The Marqués turned to him. His reply was ready. But Robledo checked him with a gesture.

“ You understand the conditions. . . . You must go out there as you would go to war, with little baggage and no encumbrances. A woman, in this sort of expedition, is nothing but a burden. Your wife isn’t going to die of grief just because you leave her in Europe. You can always write—and such an absence as that renews, instead of exhausting, love. Besides, you will be sending her money to live on ; and whatever way you look at it, you will be doing more for her than by going off to jail or shooting yourself. Are you coming with me, Federico ? ”

Torre Bianca remained silent for a space. Then he got up, made a gesture which Robledo interpreted as meaning that he was to wait, and left the room.

The American did not remain alone long ; nor did he remain altogether in silence, for through the walls and hangings came, as from a great distance, the sound of voices, that rose once or twice to the intensity of angry cries. Then came the sound of approaching steps, and Elena appeared, followed by her husband.



Elena, too, bore the traces of recent events. For her, too, certain hours she had just lived through had been so many years. But although she appeared much older, she was none the less handsome. On the contrary, her tired beauty seemed more sincere than the skilfully enhanced splendour of her happier days. Now she possessed the melancholy charm that flowers have just as they begin to fade. For twenty-four hours she had neglected her dressing-table. During that time she had experienced a succession of emotions that were either extremely painful or else annoying to her vanity. For it was difficult for her to think more of her husband's distress than of what people were saying.

With a violent gesture, she pulled aside the hangings and swept into the library like a foaming tide, her eyes defying Robledo as she advanced.

"What is this you sent Federico to tell me?" she demanded harshly. "Is it true that you want to take him away with you and force him to leave me here, to face our enemies?"

Torre Bianca, who was following her, once more subdued to her spell, began to protest, in order to soothe her.

"I shall never abandon you, Elena; that is what I told Manuel!"

But Elena was intent upon Robledo, and continued advancing towards him.

"And I thought you were a friend! How despicable of you, trying to rob a wife of her husband's support, trying to make him abandon her!"

As she spoke, she looked fixedly into Robledo's eyes as though she were trying to see her own reflection in them. But what she found there was something that made her suddenly soften her voice, and finally adopt a childish air of disgust. Even, she raised a finger to scold him. The American, however, remained unmoved before these



manœuvres, and Elena had to continue with what dignity she could :

“ Come, please explain all this to me ! What is this plan of yours to take my husband away from me, and carry him off to your distant estate where you live like a feudal lord ? ”

Unmoved either by her voice or her eyes, Robledo replied coldly, as though explaining a matter of business.

He and Federico had just been discussing the best means of getting the Marqués out of Paris. It was his intention to have an automobile ready for his friend the following morning, quite as though it had suddenly struck his fancy to take a trip to Spain. Obviously, certain precautions were necessary. Torre Bianca was free to go and come as he liked, but it was quite possible that, while the judge was making up his mind as to how to carry on the case, he was being watched by the police. Although the Spanish frontier was several hundred miles away, they could reach it before any order was given for Torre Bianca's arrest. Besides, Robledo had some friends near there, who could, in case of danger, help them to get through to Barcelona, and, once in that port, it would be easy to take passage for South America.

Elena listened frowning.

“ All that is very beautifully worked out,” she rejoined. “ But why is this plan to include only my husband ? Why can't I go too ? ”

Torre Bianca looked his surprise. Only a few hours ago, on returning from the calls she had been making, Elena had exhibited great confidence in the future, partly to arouse her husband's courage, partly to stimulate her own. The people she had seen were men with whom she had an acquaintance of long standing, and from them she had collected many promises, given, for the most part, with the melancholy and protecting gallantry inspired by memories.



. . . . Having nothing to depend on at present but these promises, she had, of course, found it necessary to place implicit trust in them, persuading herself to believe in their efficacy. But now, on hearing Robledo's plan, all her carefully patched-up optimism crumbled into dust.

Her friends' promises were nothing but lies! They would do nothing for her or her husband now that they were in difficulties; and the law would take its course. Federico would go to prison, and she would have to take up again a life full of uncertainties in this old world, where she could scarcely find a corner that she had not at some time known before. . . . Besides, here there were so many enemies, eager for revenge. . . .

Robledo saw something he had never seen before in her eyes—fear, the fear of the animal at bay. And for the first time also, he heard a note of complete sincerity in her voice.

“And you, Manuel, are the only person in the world who understands our situation; you are the only person who can help us. . . . But let me go with you! I am not strong enough to stay here alone. I'd rather be a beggar out there in the new world!”

Her tone now was so gentle and expressed such distress that Robledo felt sorry for her. He forgot all that he had once held up against her.

Torre Bianca, as though aware of his friend's sudden weakening, announced resolutely:

“Either with her, or not at all, Robledo. I am not afraid to stay here.”

Still Robledo hesitated. At last he raised his hand, accepting his friend's condition. And at once he regretted it, as though he had capriciously given his approval to something absurd.

Elena, forgetting her present worries with startling ease, began to laugh.



"I adore travelling," she began enthusiastically. "And I shall ride horseback and hunt wild animals, and have all sorts of hairbreadth escapes. Life will be so much more interesting than here! I shall feel just like the heroine of a novel!"

The American looked at her, startled. Had she no feeling? No memory? Had she already forgotten Fontenoy? She seemed at that moment not to know that she was still in Paris and that the police might at any moment step into that house to arrest her husband.

And just as disturbing was the discrepancy between the actual conditions in which colonists make their fight for existence, and this woman's romantic illusions about those conditions.

Torre Bianca interrupted his wife by saying in a hopeless tone :

"But we can't leave without paying our debts! And what are we going to do it with?"

Again Elena burst out laughing, at the same time making a gesture which implied that she thought he must have taken leave of his senses.

"Pay! What an idea! Let them wait! I can always find something to say to them that will satisfy them. . . . And from America we can send them money when you are rich."

But the more scrupulous Marqués was obsessed by the thought of his responsibilities toward his creditors.

"No. I shall not leave until we have paid the servants, at least. But, in addition, we need money for the trip."

There was a long pause; finally, as though he had found a solution, the Marqués exclaimed :

"Fortunately, there are your jewels. We can sell them before we sail."

Elena looked ironically at the necklace and rings she was wearing.



• “We won’t get two thousand francs for the lot. They are all paste, Federico.”

“But the real ones?” exclaimed Torre Bianca. “Those you bought with the money from your estate in Russia?”

Robledo thought it the moment to intervene.

“Never mind the jewels, Federico. I’ll pay your servants and the trip out . . . for both of you.”

Elena grasped both his hands, repeatedly thanking him. The Marqués was touched by his friend’s generosity. But he could not accept it, he asserted. Robledo cut his protestations short.

“That’s all right! I came to Paris with enough money to last me six months. If I go back at the end of four weeks, I can afford to pay your expenses.”

Then, with comic despair, he added:

“It only means that I’ll have to leave without going to several of the new restaurants, and without having some of the most famous wines. . . . After all, that isn’t such a great sacrifice!”

The Marqués grasped his friend’s hand in silence, while Elena shamelessly embraced him. All she could talk about now was that unknown land, for which, a few hours earlier, she had not even a thought. To her childish enthusiasm it had suddenly become a paradise.

“How glad I shall be to reach that new country, the country that, you once said, was waiting there for all those who needed it!”

And while she and her husband discussed the preparations necessary for setting off the next day on their long journey, Robledo was saying to himself, as he watched them:

“Now you’ve done it! A fine present you are going to bring those people out there. It’s true they lead hard lives out at least they live in peace. . . .”



*PART II.*

THE DESERT







## CHAPTER V

WHEN the Arragonese labourers who had emigrated to Argentina carrying along that most cherished of their possessions, the guitar with which they accompany the couplets they improvise, saw her flit by on her pony, they made a song about "The Flower of Black River." And at once the name was caught up by the whole countryside.

As a matter of fact, her name was Celinda, and she was the only daughter of the rancher, Rojas. She was small for her eighteen years, but agile and energetic as a thoroughbred colt. Most of the men of the region, who, like Orientals, considered obesity an indispensable part of feminine attractiveness, merely shrugged by way of reply when someone praised the Rojas girl's beauty. Yes, her face was right enough, mischievous-looking, with delicately up-turned nose, mouth red as a blood-lily, sharp white teeth, and enormous eyes that were, it might be objected by a connoisseur, a little too round. But when you got through with her face, well, for the rest she was just as slim as a boy. At a short distance you wouldn't have been able to tell the difference. "What's the good of a woman who doesn't look like one?" they inquired.

In boy's clothes, mounted on a broncho, circling a lasso above her head, she could ride down a wild mare or young steer with as much skill as one of her father's *peons*.

Carlos Rojas, as everyone in the county knew, belonged to an old Buenos Aires family. In his youth he had led an extravagant life in several of the European capitals. But marriage and an establishment in Buenos Aires proved just



as costly as his bachelor wanderings in the old world, and little by little the fortune he had inherited from his father dwindled away, spent, for the most part, in ostentation and unsuccessful business ventures. At the moment when he became convinced that ruin was upon him, his wife died. She had been a delicate and melancholy woman, given to writing sentimental verse which she published under a pseudonym in the fashion papers ; and it was she who had selected for her daughter the romantic name of Celinda.

It became necessary then for Rojas to give up the old farm that had been in the family for several generations, and that was worth several millions. When the three mortgages on it had been paid and his other debts settled, there was nothing for Rojas to do but strike out into the less civilised parts of the Argentine. When money had been more plentiful, he had bought a section in Rio Negro as a speculation, and to this property, which he had never seen, he now betook himself.

Farming is the last resort of many a man who has dissipated his fortune. In spite of entire ignorance of the principles, to say nothing of the practice, of agriculture, the man who has failed in other occupations expects to make a success of this most laborious and difficult of professions. Rojas, accustomed to a life of spending, believed that by transferring himself to Rio Negro he would be able to accomplish this miracle. He had never been willing to bother with the management of the farm near Buenos Aires, with its rich pasture lands capable of supporting thousands of steers. Yet now he was planning to lead the rough life of the pioneer farmer, who must conquer the wilderness if he is to live. What his ancestors had done in the rich lands near Buenos Aires, where rains are opportune, he now had to do under the brazen skies of Patagonia, that rarely, throughout the whole length of the year, let more than a few drops fall on the parched prairie.



But the erstwhile millionaire bore his misfortunes with immense dignity. He was a man of fifty or thereabouts, somewhat short in stature, with a nose of Roman proportions, and a beard streaked with white. In the midst of his rustic surroundings he preserved something of the manners acquired by contact with a more polished society. As they said at the settlement up at the dam, it didn't matter how Rojas dressed, you could always tell he had been born a gentleman. He always wore high boots, a wide-brimmed hat, and a poncho, and in his right hand carried a *rebenque* or small whip.

The buildings on his ranch were of a most modest sort. They had been put up as temporary structures in the hope that a turn for the better in his fortunes would soon make it possible to improve them.

But, as so often happens in rustic settlements, these makeshift buildings were destined to last even longer than some of those erected with great care as permanent ones.

On the walls of baked brick, with no other supports, or of simple *adobe*, rested the roof made of corrugated tin. Inside, the partitions only came part-way to the roof, so that air could circulate freely through the entire building. The rooms did not contain much in the way of furniture; the one used by Don Carlos as office and reception room was adorned with a few rifles and the skins of some of the pumas he had shot in the surrounding plateau lands. It was the rancher's custom to spend most of his time inspecting the corrals close by; but now and then he would start his horse off at a gallop for a sudden descent upon the *peons* at the other end of the ranch. One could never be sure that they weren't sleeping while the cattle strayed. . . .

The lunch hour had passed, and still Celinda had not come in. Her father, every now and then, looked impatiently out of the door. He had no fears whatever on her account. Ever since she had come to Rio Negro, at the age



of eight, she had fairly lived on horseback, treating the Patagonian plateau lands as her playhouse.

"No one is going to take any chances with Celinda," her father used to say proudly. "She's a better shot with the revolver than I am. And besides, there is no two-legged or four-legged beast can get away from her when she has her lasso along. My girl is as good as any man!"

In one of his pauses at the door he caught sight of her, approaching rapidly along the dark line that plain and sky make where they meet. The lithe mounted figure running along the horizon looked like a small tin horseman escaped from a box of toys.

In front of her pony ran a diminutive steer. And now the group, at full gallop, was growing larger with amazing rapidity. Anything moving on that immense plain appears to the bewildered eye, unaccustomed to the optical tricks of the desert, to change its size without going through the customary gradations.

The girl was close at hand now, uttering cowboy cries and cracking her lasso in order to excite the steer to a quicker pace and rush him through the gate of the corral. With a great snort he dived through the opening in the wooden stakes, whereupon Mlle. Celinda dropped lightly from her horse and came to greet her father. But the latter, after kissing her cheek, held her away from him, and looked severely at her.

"Haven't I told you that I didn't want to see you wear men's clothes? Trousers are for men, just as skirts are for women. I won't have a daughter of mine looking like a "movie" actress!"

Celinda received her father's reproof with lowered eyes, and an air of graceful hypocrisy. Dutifully promising to dress as he required, she restrained the amusement his allusion caused her, for, as a matter of fact, she scarcely ever thought of anything but those "movie" actresses in



knickerbockers that figure so largely in American films. For their sake she had taken many a five-hour gallop to Fuerte Sarmiento, the nearest town, where, on a sheet hung up in the only hotel, wandering film operators showed films which Celinda watched with breathless attention. It wasn't that the stories were so interesting, but what a good idea they gave her of the prevailing styles !

As they lunched, Don Carlos inquired of his daughter if she had been near the camp at the dam. How was the work getting on ?

The hope, which daily grew brighter, of becoming rich again, had, of late, changed Rojas from the gloomy and discouraged man he had been for so many years, into one capable of smiling once more. If the engineers of the Argentine Government succeeded in damming the Rio Negro, the canals, even then under construction according to the plans of a fellow named Robledo and his partner, would irrigate the lands that these two engineers had bought ; and since these lands adjoined his own, he too would benefit from the irrigation system, and the value of his property would go up by leaps and bounds.

Celinda listened to her father's comments on the engineering work and its possible consequences for themselves with the indifference youth generally exhibits toward money matters. But the discourse of Don Rojas on riches and what could be done with them was cut short by the arrival of a mulatto of overflowing proportions, fat-cheeked, with slanting eyes, her coarse black hair gathered into a thick braid that undulated along the elevations and declivities of her back and then hung free, endeavouring, apparently, to reach the ground.

Before coming into the dining-room, she deposited a bag full of clothes at the door. Then she made a rush for Celinda, kissed her and even spattered some of her tears over her.



"My pretty little one! My baby, my own little Señorita!"

When Celinda first came to the ranch the mulatto had been hired to take care of her, and it had been a real hardship for the woman to leave the girl. But she had never been able to get on with Don Carlos. The rancher was abrupt in his manner of giving orders, and would take no argument from women, especially when they had reached a certain age.

"The boss is a gay old boy," Sebastiana confided to her friends. "I'm getting too old for him, and it's the younger ones that catch all the smiles and pretty speeches, while all I get is sharp words and threats of the *rebenque*!"

When she had finished exclaiming over Celinda, the mulatto looked at Don Carlos with an indignation that was comical in effect.

"Well, since the boss and I can't get on together, I'm going to the dam to keep house for the Italian contractor!"

Rojas shrugged to indicate that she could go wherever she pleased for all he cared, and Celinda followed her old servant to the front door.

The afternoon was half gone when Don Carlos, who had been taking his siesta in a huge canvas arm-chair, and reading several of the Buenos Aires newspapers which the train brought out to the desert three times a week, left the ranch house.

Hitched to a post of the portico which shaded the door was a horse. The rancher smiled as he noticed that the animal bore a side-saddle. In a moment Celinda appeared, wearing a black riding-skirt. She tossed her father a kiss from the end of her riding-whip, and then, without setting foot in the stirrup or accepting a helping hand, with one leap she landed on the saddle, and the horse started off at full gallop toward the river.

But his rider did not let him go very far. Celinda dismounted in a grove of willows where a second horse, the



same one she had ridden that morning with a cross saddle, was waiting for her. Dropping her skirt and the rest of her feminine costume, she stood revealed in knickerbockers, riding-boots and a boyish shirt and necktie. She smiled as she thought of how she was disobeying "the old man," as, in accordance with local custom, she called her father.

But how surprised that other man would be to see her in a feminine riding-skirt ! No, she didn't want to surprise him that way. . . . He had always seen her in boy's clothes, and so he always treated her with the friendly confidence he would have for some one of his own sex. Who could tell what would happen were he to see her wearing skirts just like a young lady ? He might grow shy and begin being tremendously polite, and finally stop seeing her altogether !

So she left her girl's clothes on the horse she had ridden to the willows, gaily mounted the other, and pressing her slim feet against his flanks, tossed her lasso in the air, making spirals of rope above her head.

And now the Flower of Rio Negro was galloping along the river bank among the aged willow trees that droop their festoons of delicate green over the gliding water. This solitary river roadway, that stretched from the storm-beaten peaks of the Andes on the Pacific side, to its wide outlet in the Atlantic, had been named Black River because of the dark coloured plants which covered its bed, giving a greenish tinge to the snow waters of the distant mountains.

The thousand-year-old erosion of the swift stream had cut a deep gash, two or three leagues wide in certain places, in the Patagonian table land. The river slid along through this cut between two banks of earth brought down by the stream in the flood season. These banks were of a rich and light soil, extremely fertile wherever the river water reached it. But beyond this point the ground rose to form steep, yellow, sinuous walls that gazed unblinkingly at



one another across the gliding black water ; and beyond these heights stretched the *mesa*, that region where icy cold alternates with suffocating heat ; where hurricanes torment the harsh vegetation that will yield a living only to those flocks that can scour many leagues of that arid plain.

All the life of the region was concentrated in the wide fissure carved by the river waters across the desert. The two strips of soil on its banks represented so many thousand miles of fertile earth brought down by the river from its wanderings in the Andes. And it was in one part of this great cleft that the Government engineers were at work in an attempt to raise the level of the waters the few yards necessary in order to inundate the adjoining lands.

Celinda was uttering sharp cries to excite her horse ; it seemed as though she must share her delight with him. In a little while she was going to meet what interested her most in that whole wide countryside ! As she followed a turn in the river bank, the surface of the stream suddenly widened before her eyes, forming a quiet and solitary lake. At its farthest limit, at the point where the banks pressed in and disturbed its waters, were outlined the iron profiles of several great derricks, and the tin or straw roofs of a settlement. This was the little town that had grown up near the dam, a town of houses that had risen but a slight distance above the ground, with not a single second storey to break the monotonous level of its roof line.

But Celinda's curiosity stopped short of the settlement. Reining in her horse, she walked him through several squads of men working at some distance from the river, at the point where the level of the ground began to rise abruptly.

These *peons*, some of them Europeans, others half-breeds, were removing and heaping up the soil which they took from the ditches that were to become part of the irrigation



system. Two ditching machines, with a great roar of motors, were also attacking the ground in an attempt to facilitate this human labour.

Celinda looked about her with keen, exploring eyes, and turning her back on the workmen, she went toward a man she had spied on a small elevation of ground. He sat on a canvas folding chair, before a small table ; his sombrero lay at his feet, which were encased in thick, muddy boots, as rough and serviceable as the rest of his clothing. His head on his hand, he was studying the charts spread out before him.

He was one of those blond, clear-eyed young men who remind us of the Greek youths immortalised in sculpture, and who for some unexplainable reason reappear, with surprising frequency, in the northern races of Europe. Straight-nosed, with curly hair growing low over his forehead, and a firm and powerful neck line, he was an unexpected apparition in that barren spot. So absorbed was he in his calculations that he did not notice Celinda's arrival.

She still had her lasso in her hand, and with the cunning and noiseless step of an Indian, she began to climb up the slope. Not the slightest sound betrayed her approach. Within a few yards of her goal she straightened up, laughing silently at her prank, and giving the lasso a few vigorous preliminary swings, she suddenly let it fly. The noose poised over the youth and descended upon him in a flash. Then it tightened, pinning down his arms, and a slight jerk nearly upset him.

Angrily he looked about him, his fists doubled up, his muscles tense ; then suddenly he burst out laughing. To complete her impudent performance, Celinda was gently tugging at the lasso, and in order not to be overturned, there was nothing for the youth to do but move towards her. When he stood close beside her, she looked up at him apologetically.



"It's such a long time since we've seen one another ! . . . *Tanto tiempo !* I thought I'd better get you on the other end of this rope, so you can't get away !"

The youth looked his astonishment. In a drawling voice that made his slow Spanish sound amusingly foreign, he exclaimed :

"Such a long time ! Why, what about this morning ?"

"*Tanto tiempo !*" She mimicked his accent. "Well, what of it, you ungrateful *gringo* ? Is it such a small matter to you that we haven't seen one another since this morning ?"

Then they both burst out laughing, like two children.

By this time they had reached the hitching post where she had left her horse. Hurriedly she sprang to his back, as though it made her feel uncomfortable and helpless to stand on the ground. ' Besides, in spite of his six feet and over, this point of vantage made it possible for her to look down at him.

The rope was still wound about his arms and shoulders, but Celinda determined to let her captive go.

"Listen, Don Ricardo, I'm going to set you free, but only so you can do a little work !"

With a quick twist she tossed the rope off his shoulders. But, as though her presence robbed him of all initiative, the youth remained motionless before her. Majestically she offered him her hand.

"Don't be ill-bred, Mr. Watson. That is for you to kiss. You seem to be losing all your manners out here in the desert."

Amused by the girl's mock gravity, the young engineer bent over her hand. But his air of treating her with the good-natured condescension an older person displays toward a mischievous child, annoyed her.

"One of these days I'm going to get really cross with you, and then you'll never see me again. You always treat



me as though I were a little girl, when I'm not ! I'm the first lady of the land ; I'm the Princess Flor de Rio Negro ! ”

But Watson was still laughing at her ; and finally the girl laughed too ; whereupon, the Princess Flor began exhibiting a serious and maternal interest in her friend's welfare.

“ You are working too hard, and I don't like to see you get so tired, *gringo mio* ! There's too much work here for one man to do. When is Robledo coming back ? He must be having a gay time over there in Paris ! ”

Watson, as she mentioned his partner's name, caught up her serious tone. He was already back, the engineer replied, and might put in an appearance at any moment. As to the work, it didn't seem so heavy to him. He had held more difficult jobs in other countries. Until the Government engineers finished the dam, his work and Robledo's would be comparatively light, since most of the ditches were ready, waiting for the water that was to pour through them.

They were moving along side by side now, unconsciously going toward the engineering camp. Richard, as he walked along, kept a hand on her horse's neck, and looked up at Celinda, whose quick motions of her eyes and lips while she talked were often easier for him to understand than her rapidly uttered words. The *peons*, considering the day's work ended, were putting their tools together. The rider and her escort, to avoid the groups of labourers returning to the town, took a path at some distance from the river, and wound slowly up the slope that led to the *mesa*.

As they descended a spur of ground that was like a buttress in the great wall of parched clay stretching as far as the eye could reach, they saw, far below them, the lake-like width of the river above the narrow point selected for the construction of the dam. The camp, a medley of strangely-assorted buildings, scattered about without any attempt at order, contained *adobe* huts covered with straw, houses



of brick with tin roofs, tents of dirty canvas, and, most comfortable of the lot, the portable houses occupied by the engineers, overseers, and other employees. Above all the other houses, one in particular stood out, a wooden building mounted on piles, with a porch running around all four sides. It was the bungalow that, a few weeks before, had been received at Bahia Blanca for Pirovani, the Italian contractor of the works at the dam.

The streets of this hastily-improvised town were always empty during the day. But as dusk set in they began to be peopled by groups of *peons* who, returning from their work, met other groups and mingled with them, until finally hundreds of workmen were assembled on the main thoroughfare ; and they were all going in the same direction.

A frame house, the only one that, in size, compared with the bungalow of the Italian contractor, was the goal of the slowly moving crowd. Above the door was a sign on which was written in ordinary long-hand, "The Galician's Resort." The Galician was, as a matter of fact, an Andalusian, but it is the prevailing assumption in those regions that any Spaniard who comes to Argentina must by that fact be a Galician. "The Resort," of course, was chiefly useful to the community as a saloon, but it also served as a store where the most diverse articles could be purchased.

A group of faithful customers occupied by right of their patronage the vicinity of the counter or "bar." Some of them were emigrants who, once cut adrift from their native Europe, had wandered through the three Americas, from Canada to Tierra del Fuego. Others, half-breeds or even whites, had, after a few years in the desert, returned to a state approaching that of primitive man ; their features were harsh and hawk-like, their beards thick and rough, and on their long hair they wore wide-brimmed sombreros. Thrust negligently through their belts of leather adorned with silver coins, they carried their revolvers and knives.



Outside the café, waiting for their husbands, in the hope that the latter would not drink too much, if they knew that their wives were waiting for them, or watching for the companions of their nights, were assembled the beauties of the settlement, half-breed women of a light cinnamon colour, with eyes like coals, coarse hair of the thick blackness of ink, and teeth of a luminous whiteness. Some of them were so fat they looked like the grotesque exaggerations of caricature; others were as absurdly thin, as though they had just come out of a town besieged by hunger, or as if they were being consumed by flames incessantly burning within.

And now lights were twinkling in the town, their reddish points piercing through the violet veils of the twilight.

Celinda and her companion were still watching the settlement and the wide-spreading river in silence, as though afraid that the scene before them would vanish at the sound of their voices.

"Come, Señorita Rojas," exclaimed Watson suddenly, feeling the need, perhaps, of dispelling the seductive influence of the evening. "Come! It will soon be dark, and your ranch is a good distance from here."

The girl laughed at the suggestion of there being any danger for her in that, but at last she bade her friend goodbye and set her horse at a gallop.

Richard started back to the camp. He went down a rough road that passed for the main thoroughfare of the town, although there were many others of as great a width, the Government at Buenos Aires having decreed that all the towns springing up in the desert should allow their streets a minimum width of twenty yards. No one could tell how soon they might become cities! Meanwhile, the low buildings of a single storey were separated from those opposite by a space swept by the icy winds that whirled great columns of dust through them. At times the sun



baked the soil, and from its cracks, whenever a passer-by disturbed them, arose swarms of buzzing flies ; and then again, the puddles formed in the clay by the infrequent but ferocious downpours made it necessary for the inhabitants to walk through water up to their knees if they wished to call on a neighbour living opposite.

As Watson went along between the two rows of buildings he met all the principal personages of the camp. First to cross his path was the Señor Canterac, formerly a captain in the French artillery, who, according to the statements of many who called themselves his friends, had, because of certain private enterprises, been forced to flee his country. At present he was employed as engineer by the Argentine Government ; and it always fell to his lot to work on the difficult jobs that the other engineers took good care to avoid. But Canterac, being a foreigner, had to take what the native sons refused.

He was a man of forty odd, inclined to stoutness, his hair and moustache turning white. Yet he preserved a certain youthfulness of appearance. As though still wearing the uniform, he walked with military bearing, and in spite of his surroundings, paid considerable attention to the elegance of his attire.

Watson caught sight of him coming down the street on horseback, wearing a handsome riding suit, and a white helmet. The Frenchman greeted the engineer, and dismounting, walked along beside him, leading his horse by the reins, while he looked at some of the young American's drawings.

" And when do you expect Robledo ? " he inquired.

" He'll be getting here at any time now. He has probably already landed at Buenos Aires. Some friends are coming along with him, it seems."

They had reached the small frame house where the Frenchman lodged. Tossing his horse's reins with military



abruptness to the mulatto servant, Canterac turned to Richard.

"In six weeks' time, my friend, the first dam will be finished, and you and Robledo will be able to irrigate a part of your property right away."

Watson smiled. With a gesture of leavetaking, he went on towards his quarters. But at the end of a few yards he stopped to reply to the greeting of a young man, who, in his city clothes, looked as though he might be a Government clerk. His round, shell-rimmed glasses reinforced this impression, as well as the memorandum books and loose papers that he was carrying under his arm. He gave every indication of being one of those hard-working employees, who, falling into the deep ruts of routine, become incapable of initiative, or of any project requiring ambition, but live along from year to year, perfectly satisfied with the mediocrity of which they have become a part.

This was Timoteo Moreno, born in Argentina, of Spanish parents. The Commissioner of Public Works had sent him as his representative to the works at the dam, and it was his chief responsibility to pay to the contractor, Pirovani, the money sent on for that purpose by the Government.

He had just greeted Watson when he slapped his forehead, and stepped back, searching among his papers as he did so.

"I forgot to leave Captain Canterac's cheque at his place. . . . Oh, well . . . ." He shrugged, and went along beside Watson. "I'll give it to him when I go back. Anyway, there's no out-going mail until the day after to-morrow."

Now they were standing in front of the bungalow belonging to the rich man of the settlement. Just at that moment he came out and stood for a moment leaning over the railing of the balcony, but no sooner had he recognized them than he came rushing down the wooden steps. "They must come in, they must have a glass of something with him," he insisted.



The rings he wore, his heavy gold watch chain, and showy clothes did not conceal the fact that this was the Pirovani who had arrived in Argentina ten years earlier as a common labourer ; but they did give everyone to understand that he was one of the richest men to be found between Bahia Blanca and the steep wall of the Andes forming the Chilian frontier. There was not a bank in the region that would not honour his signature. Although barely forty, his heavy, muscular frame and plump, clean-shaven face already showed that softening of tissue that betrays the invasion of fat cells.

Beaming with pleasure at having some one come his way to whom he could display the magnificence of his bungalow, he pressed his invitation upon them.

“ Even though I am a widower, and live alone here, I like to have some of the comforts of Buenos Aires. Just got some new furniture, too, I want to show you. Come on in, Moreno, you haven’t seen it all, and Mr. Watson here doesn’t know half what I’ve got to show him ! ”

The two men followed their enthusiastic host up the wooden outside steps into the dining-room, which contained a large number of heavy and showy pieces of furniture. Pirovani exhibited them proudly, slapping them to show the fine quality of the oak, and rolling his eyes toward the ceiling whenever he alluded to the price he had paid for them. The parlour, too, which he insisted on showing, contained an excessive number of chairs and tables among which the visitors had to thread their way ; and the bedroom, with its elaborate furnishings, would have been far more suitable for a variety-hall actress than for Mr. Pirovani the contractor. In all the rooms, of course, the contrast between the over-elaborate furniture and the rough framework of the bungalow was startling.

“ “A pretty sum it cost me,” exclaimed the Italian proudly.  
“What do you think of it, Don Ricardo ? You’ve seen a



lot of fine things in your travels. . . . How do you like my little place ? ”

Watson replied as best he could ; but the proud possessor of the bungalow needed very little encouragement for his outbursts of satisfaction.

When they returned to the dining-room, a young half-breed servant, her thick braid hanging down her back, placed some bottles and glasses on the table.

“ I’m going to have a new housekeeper,” announced Pirovani. “ This place needs someone who knows how to take care of it. Rojas, the rancher, is going to let me have his Sebastiana.”

Certain that Moreno and the contractor wanted to talk over the construction plans, Watson refused a second glass of his host’s wine, and left the bungalow.

It was dark now in the streets and all the life of the town seemed concentrated in the tavern. Through the glass of its double swinging doors two rectangles of red light fell on the road, providing the only illumination in the settlement.

Most of the patrons of the establishment were standing, taking their drinks over the bar. A Spaniard was playing the accordion, while some of the other workmen were dancing with the half-breed girls. There was an abundance of Chilians who had strayed in from the other side of the mountains, and who, after a few days of work, would be sure to wander off to some other camp, driven by their eternal restlessness ; a strange and disturbing lot, these, always ready with their knives, yet always ready to smile and speak softly. In another group were the natives of the land, with their thick beards, ponchos on their backs, and heavy spurs clicking, stray horsemen, who lived no one knew how, nor did anyone know where they came from. Like the cowboys of former times, they wore the wide leather belt ornamented with silver coins which served as a rack for their revolvers and knives.



All of these Americans treated the accordion-playing and the waltzes of the Galicians and *gringos* with scornful silence, until finally one of them demanded the *cueca* in so threatening a tone that the couples who were dancing with their arms about one another's necks in European fashion, hastily left the floor. Then the native dances began; the *pericon*, the *gato*, those old Argentine dances, for so many generations the chief diversion of the natives, and, more popular among them than any other, the Chilean *cueca*, which, for hours at a time, with its accompaniment of hand-clapping and sharp cries, excited the crowd gathered in the tavern.

The proprietor of the *boliche* handed out two guitars, carefully kept under the counter, whereupon the players squatted with their instruments on the ground; but at once a half-breed servant girl hurried towards the horse-skulls which were the places of honour of the establishment.

Besides possessing this distinction, they were also the best seats in the place. The proprietor owned a couple of chairs which were always brought out when the Commissioner of Police or some other dignitary came to call, but they were rickety, and gave small promise of lasting out the evening. The steadiest and safest seats in the *boliche* were those provided by the skeletons of animals, dragged in for this useful purpose from the *mesa*.

At the sound of the guitars, the couples stepped out from the groups along the wall. The girls, a handkerchief in their left hands, held out their skirts with the right, and slowly revolved. The men, also holding a handkerchief in their left hands, gave it a rotary motion, as they circled round their partners, for the *cueca*, like the dances of primitive times, tells the eternal story of the male's pursuit of the female. The women, meanwhile, danced in small circles, fleeing from the men, whose wider circles enclosed those of their partners.



The girls who were not dancing clapped their hands continuously, emphasising the purring rhythm of the guitars. Now and then, one of them would sing a couplet of the *cueca*, at which the men would shout and toss up their hats.

A horseman dismounted in front of the tavern. He tied his mount to a post of the leaf screen, and came in, receiving full in his face as he stood in the door, the red light of the lamps that hung from the ceiling. The newcomer, whom the men greeted with respect, might have been about thirty years of age. Like all the other horsemen of the region, he wore a poncho and heavy spurs; his hair and beard were long, and his sharply-outlined profile might have been taken for that of an Arab. Although handsome, his bearing was harsh and repellent, and in his black eyes shone at times an expression that was both imperious and cruel. This was Manos Duras, notorious in the territory, and a somewhat disquieting neighbour, for he lived from the sale of cattle; but no one had ever been able to discover where he bought his steers.

The proprietor made haste to offer him a glass of gin, while even the roughest-looking *gauchos* raised a hand to their hats as though he were their chief. The Galicians looked curiously at him, repeating his name to one another, while the *mestizas* went towards him, smiling like slave-girls.

Manos Duras accepted this reception somewhat haughtily. One of the women, eager to provide him with a seat of honour, dragged out another horse-skull, on which the fear-inspiring *gaucho* sat down, while the patrons of the tavern squatted around him on the floor.

The *cueca*, interrupted for a moment by this arrival, went on again, and did not stop even at the entrance of another personage of important demerit, to whom, as soon as he appeared on the threshold, the tavern-keeper



began bowing most respectfully, from the other side of the bar.

This was Don Roque, Commissioner of Police at the dam and the only representative of Argentine authority in the settlement. As the Governor of the territory of Rio Negro lived in a town on the Atlantic which it required a journey of twelve days on horseback to reach—six times what it required to go to Buenos Aires by train—the Commissioner, who was his representative, enjoyed an ample freedom for the simple reason that he was forgotten. The Governor lived too far away to send for him, and the Minister of the Interior, who resided in the capital of the Republic, did not deign even to notice the Commissioner's existence.

As a matter of fact, he did not abuse his authority, nor had he at his disposal the means of making others feel it too heavily. Fat, good-natured, and of somewhat rustic manners, he was a native of Buenos Aires, who, falling on evil days, had been forced to ask for a Government job, and had resigned himself to accepting the one offered him in Patagonia. He wore city clothes, adapted, however, to the discharge of his duties by the addition of high boots and a wide-brimmed sombrero. A revolver in full view on his waistcoat was the only insignia of authority he displayed.

The proprietor handed out his best chair, kept under the counter for guests of unusual distinction; and the Commissioner set it down near Manos Duras, who, by way of acknowledging the Police Commissioner's presence removed his hat, but did not stir from the horse-skull on which he was sitting.

The dance went on. Don Roque was puffing with great satisfaction at a huge cigar, which the *gaucho*, in a lordly manner, had offered.

"Do you know," said the Commissioner, speaking in a



low tone, "they say you're the fellow who stole three steers from the Pozo Verde ranch last week. That's outside my jurisdiction, since it's in the Rio Colorado limits, but my associate, the Commissioner over that way, thinks you're the one that did it."

Manos Duras went on smoking in silence. Finally, he spat.

"They don't want me to sell meat to the camp up here at the dam."

"Well, they told the Governor of the territory that it was you who killed those two peddlers a few months back."

The terrible *gaucho* shrugged and said coldly, as if bored by this dialogue :

"Why don't they prove what they say?"

And the dance in the "Galician's Resort" went on until ten o'clock, this being, in a land where everyone gets up with the dawn, the equivalent of those early morning hours at which the night revels of city dwellers come to an end.

But the chief citizens of the settlement were not asleep. Nearly all of them could be found late in the evening, sitting at a desk or table somewhere, pen in hand, scenes very different from those actually around them before their eyes.

Canterac, his head leaning on his arm, was looking at a little house near the Champ de Mars. In it was a woman, of rather sad expression, whose hair was turning grey although her cheeks still had the freshness of girlhood. Two little girls sat near her at the table, and a boy, *his* boy, fourteen years old now, sat in his father's place. . . . They were talking of him, and Canterac, sitting at his rough oak table in Patagonia, put out a hand to speak to them. . . . The stiff pen fell out of his hand. Smiling to himself, he went on with his writing :—

"And I shall see you soon. Within a few days I shall



make the last payment on those debts of honour that drove me away from you. . . . And that I have at last cancelled them is due to you, my brave comrade, and to your wise management of the savings I have sent you. How good it will be to see you and the children. . . .”

For the moment he had lost his expression of stern authority. This was another Canterac, one never seen in that Patagonian settlement.

Then, as he was about to slip his letter into an envelope, a postscript occurred to him :

“ I enclose this month’s cheque. Next month I shall have more to send you as I shall receive my pay for some of the extra jobs I have been doing lately.”

Pirovani, too, was writing a letter that evening. In a nun’s school in Italy, among class-mates some of whom bore the most aristocratic names in the kingdom, his daughter was being educated. He smiled as he wrote, pouting out his lips as he used to do when he played with his little daughter.

“ You must learn everything a fine young lady should know, my little Ida. Your old father got the money he is spending now on your education by good hard work, and sometimes, when you were a little girl, he deprived himself of a lot of things. You mustn’t forget that I had a hard time of it when I was a boy, and had none of your advantages. But, just the same, I made my way in the world. I know I’m ignorant, but my little Ida will know enough for two when she leaves school. And this is something else I want her to know. If I haven’t married again, it was on your account, *Ida mia* ; it was for you that I have worked so hard.



“Next year I am coming home, and we shall buy a castle, and you will rule it like a queen ; and then some fine young cavalry officer will fall in love with you, and you will marry him, and bear his aristocratic name, and your poor old father will be jealous. . . .”

Moreno, too, in the modest building where his office adjoined his living quarters, was writing to his wife all about the fine dream he cherished of finally landing a Government job in Buenos Aires. . . .

Richard Watson was not writing letters that evening. His drawing-board on his knees, he was tracing on a large sheet of paper the path of one of the main canals. But as he worked, the definite outlines of board and tracings on it became blurred. The red and blue inks on the paper became a river bordered with willow trees standing out with refreshing beauty in a land of parched soil and choking dust.

The landscape he saw was of a diminutive scale. The whole extent of the district around the camp fitted into the limits of his drawing paper. At the far end of the plain he suddenly saw a rider, no bigger than a small fly, moving towards him with graceful swing and something joyous about her free motion. . . . Was it the Señorita Rojas in her boys' clothes, whirling her lasso ?

Watson raised his hand to his eyes, and rubbed them. No, there was nothing there. He brushed the paper, as though to sweep away the intruding vision, and the canal with its red and blue lines, reappeared.

Once more he set to work on his monotonous task, but in a few moments he raised his eyes again from the paper, for now Celinda was appearing at the back of the room, mounted on her horse ; the apparition was not of pigmy proportions this time, but life-sized. . . .

The girl threw her lasso at him, breaking out into an-



restrained, youthful laughter that displayed all her sharp young teeth ; and automatically, Richard moved his head to dodge the descending circles of rope.

"I must be asleep," he thought. "There's no use trying to work to-night. Well, let's go to bed."

But before he went to sleep, he saw the whole camp spread out before him, and looked down on it from a height in the sunset, just as when Celinda, on her horse, had been beside him.

But this time the ground below was dark, and on the blue background of the sky, pierced with lights, an apparition grew before him, a woman of a grave beauty, with stars in her hair, and on her dark tunic, a woman of great size who spread out her arms, plucking in the darkness the dreams that grow in the wide meadows of the infinite, and scattering a rain of soft, fragrant petals over the earth. . . . It was Night herself, comforting with dreams the restless, striving exiles of that far-away Patagonian settlement. . . .

But, as Richard Watson was young, the dewiest, freshest petals were for him ; as they touched him he shrank away, and then felt a terror lest there should be no more ; for the petals that startled him, even as they caressed, were the first dreams of youthful love.



## CHAPTER VI

A GROUP of children playing on the "main street," so-called, burst into shouts of astonishment as they caught sight of the coach which, three times a week, made the trip from the dam to Fuerte Sarmiento, for it presented an extraordinary appearance.

These little ragamuffins, busy with their games in the ruts and holes of the highway, presented all the racial diversities characteristic of the settlement's population. There were white children shuffling about in their elders' cast-off shoes, their small forms lost in the baggy folds of their fathers' trousers; and there were half-breed children whose dress had been simplified to a mere shirt, short enough to expose their little copper-coloured bellies to the air.

As the travellers who arrived at the dam had rarely been known to bring anything with them in the way of baggage save a canvas sack in which was heaped whatever clothing they possessed, the young inhabitants were very naturally excited and astonished at sight of the trunks and boxes heaped on the top of the mail coach as, drawn by four lean and clay-spattered nags, it rattled up the road. So high was the pile of luggage roped on to the coach roof that, as the stage lurched into and out of the ruts of the clay road, the whole structure tipped over at such an angle that it seemed about to upset.

The men who were out of work, attracted by the novel sight, stood watching from the doorway of the tavern. The coach stopped finally in front of the frame house occupied by Watson, who came out in front of his door, his servants peering out from the doorway behind him.

As soon as they saw that the passenger stepping down



from the coach was Robledo, men and women rushed forward to greet him, stretching out their hands to him in the confident comradeship of the desert. But everyone promptly forgot him at sight of the other passengers.

First came the Marqués de Torre Bianca, who turned around to help his wife to alight from the clumsy steps.

The Marquésa, dressed in a luxurious travelling suit which contrasted oddly with her surroundings, wore the hard expression which disfigured her beauty in her bad moments.

In spite of her thick veil, the red dust of the long road she had travelled covered her face and hair. With scarcely restrained astonishment and ill-humour, she looked about her, and her eyes betrayed the despair with which she was saying to herself, "Is this what I have come to?"

"Well, here we are," said Robledo cheerfully. "Two days and two nights from Buenos Aires, and a couple of hours driving through a dust storm—that isn't so bad! The ends of the earth are quite a way off from here!"

Several of the workmen who had welcomed Robledo began, of their own accord, to unload the baggage. These were Elena's things sent on to her at Barcelona by her maid, and she cherished them. They were the chests and boxes saved from her shipwreck. . . .

Meanwhile, a group of children and ragged women had gathered around Elena, gazing at her with amazement and admiration, as though she had fallen into their midst from another planet. Some of the little girls timidly felt the cloth of her dress. Their fingers had never touched anything so wonderful!

By this time the news of Robledo's arrival had reached Canterac, Pirovani and Moreno, and the engineer was presenting them to his friends.

Watson, seeing that the multitude of bags and boxes were being carried into the house he occupied with Robledo, said to his partner :



"You don't expect the lady to share our rough quarters, do you?"

"The lady," Robledo replied, "is the wife of an old college friend of mine. He is going to take pot-luck with us, and so is she. You don't need to build a palace for her."

But Elena found it difficult to conceal her distress as she looked about at the rooms that she was henceforth to live in; rough wooden walls, scanty and awkward furniture, and scattered about, on every side, saddles, engineering instruments, and sacks of provisions; and everything in this house occupied by two busy men who had no thought for anything except their work, was in disorder, and covered with dust.

Torre Bianca was never, under any circumstances, surprised. As Robledo took him through the house, putting in a word of apology now and then for its appearance, the Marqués smiled gently at his friend. Whatever Manuel did seemed to him worthy of approbation.

"And here are the servants," said Robledo, introducing to Elena a fat half-breed, already well on in years, who acted as housekeeper; two little barefooted *mestizas*, who served as errand-girls, and the Spanish peasant who took care of the horses. All of this ragged crew expressed, with incessant smiles, the admiration they felt for the beautiful lady, and Elena finally broke into a laugh as she remembered the servants she had left in Paris.

After supper, Robledo took his partner aside to discuss the progress of the work with him.

As Watson showed him the plans and documents, he also mentioned what Canterac had said to him that afternoon.

"He says that in six months we shall be irrigating. . . ."

Robledo looked immensely pleased.

"Then we'll see this hard-baked soil that bears nothing



but *matorrales* now, turn into the kind of earth they must have had in the Garden of Eden. 'Thousands of people will lead happier and better lives here than they could ever do in the old world, and with all that, you and I, Watson, are going to get rich. We'll get rich because we'll be helping other people to get rich. That's the way it goes. If you want progress, you've got to make it profitable to somebody."

The two friends sat silent looking into the air before them as if they saw there the lands eternally green, the gurgling canals in which gleamed silver water, the roads bordered with tall trees, and the white houses, which were to come to life on the arid *mesa* at the magic touch of water. Watson, as he saw the picture unfold before him, was reminded of his native California; to Robledo, the scene in his mind's eye, was very like his beloved Valencia.

It was Watson who came out of his day-dream first. He nodded towards the adjoining room in which they had left the new arrivals. The Marqués was dozing in a canvas chair; Elena sat at a little distance from him, her head in her hands, in a tragic attitude which indicated plainly that the question, "What have I come to?" was throbbing in her mind with desperate persistence.

During the few days she had spent in Buenos Aires, her exile had seemed to her tolerable. The capital was like any large European city. It was only after determined search that she had discovered a corner of the old colonial town, a small remnant of earlier and more primitive times, barely sufficient to convince her that she had actually reached America.

The only thing that had seemed really strange to her during her sojourn in Buenos Aires, besides her quarters in a second-class hotel, was the absence of her automobile; apart from this, her manner of living had undergone no great change. But then came that terrible journey across inter-



minable plains through which the train crawled for hours, and never a house nor a living soul. It was as though the world had suddenly become nothing but space! And then the arrival in this a strange land where the turn of wheel or even a step started up clouds of dust; and the soil which was dissolved and held in suspension in the air clogged and irritated her nose and throat; where the people looked ragged and unkempt, and yet treated everyone else with a certain familiarity, as though they considered anyone who came there their equal! What had she come to?

Robledo answered the question he read in his partner's eyes.

"My friend is going to help us. He's an engineer. But don't worry about him. I am going to give him a share in our business, out of my half, of course."

Then he told Watson the few facts he thought his partner should know about the Marqués.

"As long as your friend is going to help us," said the young American, "you had better take his share out of my half as well as yours. He seems a nice fellow. Anyway, I feel sorry for his wife."

Robledo took the boy's hand in his, in quick response to his generosity, and they dropped the subject.

On the very next morning, Elena, who showed a certain easy adaptability to the diverse circumstances of her life, set out to win the admiration of her hosts by her domestic talents; just as, a few weeks earlier, she had sought distinction in Paris drawing-rooms through quite other attainments. Dressed in a tailored suit which she had cast aside in Paris, but which caused a great sensation among the engineer's servants, she started out, with carefully gloved hands, to set the house in order.

The half-breed and her two little helpers submissively followed the Señora around, until the moment came when



Elena rashly ventured to add example to precept ; where-upon her ignorance of housework became immediately apparent. It was only too clear that she did not at all know how to do the things she had ordered to be done, and the half-breed's help was more than once required to get the Marquésa out of the difficulties her ignorance had plunged her into.

In the kitchen, a stove in which was burned the same oil as that used for the dredging machines, served for cooking purposes. Elena, delighted by the ease with which the flame could be lighted and put out, determined to have something to do with the preparation of the next meal. But she soon had to retire before the superior skill of the half-breed, who was now frankly laughing at her pretensions as a housekeeper.

Still trying to be useful, Elena took off her gloves in order to wash the dishes, but she at once put them on again, fearful that the very hot water might injure her delicate skin, and destroy the polish of her nails—and she remembered that, in her moments of despair, she had felt a certain relief in contemplating her hands.

Torre Bianca, dressed in a tweed riding suit, accompanied Watson and Robledo to the canals. He watched the pile-drivers at work, saw what was being done, and talked with the *peons*. It wasn't long before he was covered with dust from head to foot ; his sun-burned hands itched painfully ; and yet he already felt the happy tranquillity of the man who knows that he can earn his daily bread.

At nightfall the three engineers returned to the house, where they found dinner awaiting them. Elena had been complaining of the rustic simplicity of the table-covers and plates. The half-breed, at her instigation, purchased for a modest price, some additional pieces of china which had found their way from Buenos Aires to the "Galician's Résort." The next day some flowers, brought in by the



two little copper-coloured errand girls, appeared on the table, and it became more evident, from day to day, that there was now a woman accustomed to the refinements of life in the engineers' house.

One evening, while the half-breed was serving the first course, Elena threw off from about her shoulders an old evening wrap which, as it was somewhat the worse for its previous services, she now used as a dressing-gown. As she emerged from this covering it was revealed that she was in evening dress. Her gown was a little worn, but it was still a brilliant relic of happier days.

Watson looked at her with astonishment; Robledo made a gesture which indicated that he thought she had gone crazy, but the Marqués remained impassive, as though nothing that Elena did could cause him any surprise.

"I've always dressed for dinner," observed Elena, "and I don't see any reason for changing my habits here. It would make me so uncomfortable!"

The hours after the evening meal were usually spent in long conversations. Robledo did most of the talking. He liked to tell the stories of the various interesting characters he had seen pass through "the land of all the world." Many of them had already wandered over a great part of the planet before they landed in the port of Buenos Aires. Others, eager for adventure, had fled to the new continent in order to begin a new life there.

In the capital they had encountered the same obstacles as those they had run away from in Europe. The big city was already old. Tenements and slums had grown up there too, and it was as hard to make a living as ever it was in Europe. Sometimes it was even harder, so great was the competition between all professions in the crowd thronging into Buenos Aires from every quarter of the globe.



So they sought the waste places of the republic, the territories that were still arid plains, and began transforming them for the future generations of immigrants.

"What a lot of strange characters I have seen pass through here!" Robledo would begin. "I remember one fellow, a *peon* who, in spite of his angry-looking, bulbous nose, inflamed by long years of drinking, still had something about him that suggested an interesting history. When he came straggling through here he was nothing but a wreck; but he was like those ruined palaces, the smallest fragment of which, a piece of broken pillar, or a bit of pediment, picked up from among the crumbled walls, evokes the splendours of the past. Yet this fellow would stop at nothing, not even theft, when he craved drink, and would lie for days on the ground, dead drunk. But a gesture, a chance word, would make us suspect that he had not always been a dirty, drink-sodden vagabond.

"One day I found him brushing the foreman's hair, just for the joke of the thing, and shaping the fellow's moustache, making it look like Kaiser Wilhelm's. So I gave him a drink; I gave him all the drinks he could hold, because that's the only way to make that kind of a fellow talk. And so I learned that this broken-down old drunkard was a German baron, once a captain of the Imperial Guard. He had gambled with some money left in his charge by his superior officers, and instead of committing suicide, as his family expected him to do, he came to America, where he began his career as a general. He ended up a useless, drunken day-labourer."

Seeing that Elena was interested, Robledo went on modestly :

"This German Baron was a general in one of the revolutions in Venezuela. I, too, was once a general in another South American republic. I was even Minister of War for ten days . . . but they threw me out for being too



scientific, and for not knowing how to handle a *machete* as well as my aides."

Then Robledo went on to speak of another *peon*, a drunkard also, a silent, gloomy sort of fellow, who had crawled into the camp up at the dam to die. They had buried him near the river, and Robledo had found some of the poor devil's papers in the canvas sack the vagabond dragged along with him. He had once been a well-known architect in Vienna. One of the photographs among the papers was of a lady with an impressive head-dress and long pendant earrings, who looked very much like the murdered Empress. This was the architect's wife. While her husband was accompanying General Gordon on one of his expeditions, she had been killed in Khartoum, torn to pieces by the fanatics whom the Mahdi was leading through the Sudan. The other photograph, that of a handsome Austrian officer, his white coat snugly fitted in at the waist, was the vagabond's son.

"And it's no use trying to reform those fellows," said Robledo. "You may clean them up a bit, and make life a little more comfortable for them; you may preach to them about drinking less, and try in every way to help them 'get back': as soon as they are rested and begin to look a little happier, they come up to you some fine morning with packs on their backs. 'Well, I'm off, boss! What's due me?' And it's no use asking them any questions. Everything is all right; they have no complaints to make; but just the same, they light out. No sooner do they get a few square meals than the devil who drives them round and round the globe suddenly remembers them and starts them off again. They know perfectly well that, beyond the horizon line out yonder are the Andes, and beyond the Andes, Chile; and beyond that the Pacific and its islands, and then the crowding masses of China. . . . And so their mania for wandering awakens . . . they must always see what is beyond. . . .



They pick up their bundles and start out again, with hunger and exhaustion waiting for them out there. . . . They die in hospitals, or in the desert ; and if they do not die, but keep on, always following the ' beyond ' that mocks and beguiles them, they turn up here again—but only because they have made a complete circuit of the globe."

Now and then the two engineers spoke of their own lives. Watson's history was of the briefest. Leaving his native California after graduating from Berkeley, he had taken up his engineering work in the silver mines of Mexico, and from there he had gone to Peru. Finally, he had moved on to Buenos Aires, where he had met Robledo, and it was there the two men had gone into partnership in order to carry out their Rio Negro enterprise.

The Spaniard did not like to recall his experiences in America before his arrival in Argentina. In that earlier period he had taken part in revolutions for which he felt nothing but contempt, becoming involved in them merely because of his desire for activity. For the same reason he had undertaken various business ventures only to discover in the course of them that he was being deceived and robbed, sometimes by his partners, sometimes by the Government. Violent changes in his fortunes had thrown him from absurd abundance into abject want. But he avoided talking of all this, and most of his stories were about life in Patagonia.

Once he had crossed the enormous plateau which begins at the cut of the Black River and stretches toward the Strait of Magellan. He had started out on this exploring expedition after resigning his position with the Argentine Government, and to avoid expense, he had taken with him only a native *peon* and a troupe of six desert horses, capable of feeding on the rough weeds of the *mesa*. Robledo and the *peon* rode all day, changing horses at frequent intervals. The engineer had, with the help of some of his friends,



made out a map indicating the springs, the only possible camping places.

For several years there had been droughts. On reaching the first spring, Robledo found that it was very salt. He was accustomed to the brackish water which the optimism of the desert explorers considers drinkable ; but the water in this spring was of a saltiness that was more than he or the Indian with him could stomach.

They went on, confident that they would come upon a spring the next day. When they reached it, they found that it did not contain salt water, for the reason that there was no water in it at all. So they continued across the plateau that was always endless and always the same. Steering their course by the compass, they suffered a thirst which made them walk with their lower jaws drooping, and through their eyes, starting from their heads, passed now and then the terrifying glitter of madness. . . . And finally they had been forced to resort to a loathsome thing in order to ease the torment of their swollen tongues and throats with a little liquid.

“ What tormented me,” said Robledo, “ was the memory of all the times when I had been asked to have a drink in some café or other, and had not cared enough about what was set before me to drink it—beer, charged waters, iced drinks—and then I was stricken with remorse at the memory of certain parties I had been to, when I had passed by the buffet full of decanters and bottles without taking any of their contents ; for I kept saying to myself, excited with fever as I was, and staggering along under the hard, merciless sun : ‘ If you had drunk all the beers, and all the soda waters, and all the iced drinks that were offered you and that you didn’t appreciate, you would now have inside of you a reserve store of liquids and you’d be able to stand this awful thirst much better ! ’ And this absurd idea tormented me like remorse for a crime, and at times I wanted to punch



my own head for my stupidity in not having drunk everything that had once been within my reach so that I might have been prepared for that awful desert trip.

"Finally, with only two of our six horses still stumbling along beside us, we reached a well of fresh water. That was the most delicious drink of my whole life! And after all our long, hard pull through that desert of death, we found nothing! The information I had been given, and to confirm which I had started off on this expedition, proved to be false. . . . But that's the way you have to seek fortune now, for those of us who go to the new world are half a century late. All the rich lands, those easy to develop, have been taken up, and only those that are remote and inhospitable, are left—and often all that they offer is ruin and death.

"However," Robledo continued, "men go right on coming to this corner of the globe. Hope lives here among us, and without hope life is intolerable. And just consider our own household, for instance! Elena there, a Russian, Federico, Italian, Watson from the United States, I, a Spaniard. And the people who come to see us are each of them of a different nationality. As I say, it's the land of all the world!"

Little by little, it became the custom of the most important personages of the settlement to call at the engineers' house after supper. First to appear was Canterac, in a suit of military cut, and still more carefully brushed and polished than before the arrival of the Torre Blancas. Then came Moreno, betraying a certain nervous agitation at greeting his hostess, uttering a few stammerings instead of words, and almost biting off his tongue in the tenseness of his embarrassment. And last came Pirovani, displaying a new suit every other night, and always bringing his hostess a present.

"Canterac used to laugh at him, asserting that if Pirovani was late it was because he had been polishing his watch



charms, watch chain and cuff-buttons, so as to dazzle the rest of the company.

One evening, the Italian appeared in a startling suit just arrived from Bahia Blanca, bearing in his fat hand a bouquet of enormous roses.

"These were brought down to me to-day from Buenos Aires, Señora Marquésa, and I hasten to lay them at your feet!"

Canterac glared at the Italian with mock indignation, and murmured in a loud aside to Robledo:

"That's a lie! These roses came by telegraph! Moreno, who knows everything, told me so, and this afternoon Pirovani sent a man to get them from the station. He had strict orders to gallop all the way!"

The housekeeper and the two little half-breeds cleared the table, and the living room, in spite of its rough wooden partitions, began to look suggestive of festivity, as the three callers grouped about Elena, offering her compliments and conversation, according to their talents. It was noticeable that they invariably repeated the word *marquésa* at every opportunity, as though they enjoyed being constantly reminded that they were in such distinguished company.

Elena soon discovered a preference for Canterac which she made no attempt to conceal. After all, he was of her world, although his circle in Paris had not been the same as hers. Yet it had been adjacent, and though they had never met, they discovered that they had mutual friends.

While the Frenchman and Elena talked, Moreno smoked resignedly, exchanging a few words with Watson, or listening to Pirovani's discussions with Robledo and the Marquis. But he had little attention for anyone save the Marquésa and Canterac, whom he watched with anxious eyes. However, the *tertulia* underwent a transformation after the arrival of Pirovani with his roses.

The next evening, Elena and the men of her household



were sitting at table, more silent than usual. She was wearing one of her most startling evening dresses, one which, even in Paris, would have been described as daring. But the three engineers, still in their work clothes, appeared to be exhausted by the day's labours. Robledo yawned several times, though he was making valiant efforts to keep awake. The Marqués was quietly nodding in his chair; and Elena, meanwhile, was looking at Watson as though she had for the first time become aware of him, which caused the young American considerable discomfort.

Suddenly Pirovani appeared at the door, carrying a large package, and arrayed in a new suit of wide checked material the many colours of which resembled the mottled patterns of a python's skin.

"Señora Marquésa," he began solemnly, "a friend of mine in Buenos Aires has just sent me this box of caramels. Allow me to present them to you!"

Elena, amused by the contractor's new clothes, smilingly acknowledged his present, rewarding him for his attentions with several glances full of coquetry.

At that point, Moreno arrived, recklessly got up in patent leather boots, a wide-skirted cutaway, and a high silk hat, just as though he were about to call on his chief, the Minister of the Interior.

Robledo, rousing a little at these arrivals, observed ironically:

"What elegance, Moreno!"

"I was afraid," explained the latter, "that these things would get moth-eaten in the trunk, so I put them on to give them an airing."

Timidly he approached Elena. "Good-evening, Señora Marquésa!" Imitating the personages of elegant life and manners whom he had so often admired in novels and on the stage, he bent over her hand. Then, unwilling to leave her side after this successful performance, he did his utmost



to keep up a conversation with her, to Pirovani's intense indignation. Finally the Italian got up, as a protest against this intrusion, and could be heard inquiring of Robledo in his corner :

" Did you ever see anything like the get-up of that jack-ass ? "

But the surprises of the evening were not yet over.

The door opened once more, and Canterac appeared on the threshold, where he paused a moment, giving all his spectators the opportunity to get a good look at him.

He wore a dinner coat, and a fine and exquisitely ironed dress shirt, and when finally he stepped into the room, he did so with a certain languid grace as though he were presenting himself in a Paris drawing-room. After a slight bow to the men, he bent over Elena and kissed her hand.

" I too felt like dressing for dinner, this evening, Marquésa, as in the good old times."

Elena, pleased by this homage, turned her back upon Moreno, and made the new arrival sit down beside her. For the rest of the evening she devoted most of her attentions to the Frenchman, while Pirovani sulked in a corner, making small attempt to conceal his displeasure, though he was obviously impressed by Canterac's aristocratic appearance.

For several evenings after this, the contractor failed to appear. Moreno, curious about the reason for his absence, called at the Italian's and came back with some news.

" Pirovani's gone to Bahia Blanca without telling anyone what for. He must have some important business on."

So the *tertulias* continued. Canterac in his dinner coat still enjoyed Elena's preference, and Moreno got into his swallow-tail every evening for no other purpose, apparently, than to carry on his desultory conversations with Torre Bianca. Even the Marqués appeared one evening in a dinner coat, and when Robledo made a gesture of astonishment, he gave a shrug and a nod towards his wife.



On the fifth evening, Moreno came rushing in to announce that Pirovani had returned. "He may get here at any moment now!"

And since Pirovani had provided them all with a subject for speculation, everyone had the sense of waiting for him to put in an appearance.

Then the door opened; and pausing on the threshold as Canterac had done, in order to allow the onlookers to get the full effect of his attire, Pirovani appeared—in a frock coat that was resplendent with lapels of a heavily-ribbed silk, the fibres of which were as thick as those of wood, a white waistcoat richly embroidered, a white camelia in his buttonhole, and a large ribbon from which dangled a monocle. . . . Needless to say, he had never learned to wear one!

His aspect was solemn and magnificent, like that of a circus director, or a world-famous prestidigitator. Making manful efforts to preserve his calm and conceal his emotions, he nodded with masculine indifference to the men, and bowed low before the Marquésa whose hand he raised to his lips.

Elena's eyes gleamed with suppressed amusement. Everything about Pirovani always seemed to her humorous. But, perceiving that this transformation had been accomplished in her honour, she welcomed him affectionately, and made him sit down beside her. Canterac, visibly offended by his rival's triumph, abruptly left the group, while Moreno, with a scandalised expression, made a gesture towards Pirovani and muttered to Robledo:

"So that's the important business he took a trip to Bahia Blanca for! That's what he made such a mystery about!"

Robledo, however, left him to mutter alone, and went on talking to Watson, who, still dazed by the contractor's theatrical entrance, was watching him with considerable amusement.

"From dinner-coats to swallow-tails," growled Robledo.



“ We’ll be holding carnival out on the desert soon, and this woman will be driving us all crazy before we get through ! ”

He glanced with relief at the young American, who, like himself, still wore his simple work clothes, and mentally compared his appearance with that of the other men in the room.

“ What a commotion that sort of woman stirs up in a frontier settlement, where men live alone, and have no other distraction from their work ! ” he thought. “ And she’s only just begun. . . . Who knows what she’ll try next ? We may all end up by killing one another on her account ! Perhaps this is Helen of Troy in our midst. . . . ”

With a cynical shrug, Robledo turned his back on the group around Elena. He had done his best to leave her in the old world. His conscience was clear on that score !



## CHAPTER VII

“ **A** NOTHER little glass of *mate*, *comisario*? ”  
The Police Commissioner of the camp sat opposite Don Carlos Rojas in the latter's living-room. A half-breed girl, standing very straight, was looking at the two men with her slanting eyes, waiting for the master's orders.

In front of them on the table were two little calabash shells full of a decoction made from the *mate* herb, and they were sipping the liquid through the silver “ straw ” that is known in these regions as a *bombilla*. No sooner did the servant hear the gurgling of the liquid in the straws, which indicated that the contents of the cup were getting low, than she ran to the stove and brought the “ peacock ” or *pava* as the kettle is called, from the curved neck of which she poured boiling water on the soaking leaves at the bottom of the calabashes, and filled these unique goblets to the brim.

Rojas and his guest, as they talked, took frequent sips of their tea. It was evident from the rancher's expression that something had gone wrong with him. As a matter of fact, he had lost another steer, and he angrily attributed this loss to Manos Duras, who, of late, had sold altogether too many pieces of beef to the camp at the dam. As Rojas himself was its official victualler, the loss of his trade, in addition to the disappearance of his steers, seemed to him an insufferable outrage.

He had sent in hot haste for the Commissioner, and together, after Don Rojas had told his suspicions, they had



counted his herd. It was certain that one was lacking. And, as he talked with Don Roque, the rancher worked himself up to the point where he came out flatly with the statement that there was no justice to be had in Rio Negro.

"But," protested the *comisario* in a tone of discouragement, "I sent that fellow up to the capital of the territory three times, under guard, in fact, he went as a prisoner, and each time he got off scot-free. No proofs! What could we do? No one will testify against him!"

But Rojas continues his protests, and the Commissioner, to quiet his growing irritation, promised to make a more determined effort than ever this time to bring the thief to justice.

However, he had at his disposal very few means of carrying out his promise. The police force at the settlement consisted of four lazy rascals, whose uniforms had grown old and spotted in the service, and whose only weapons were cavalry swords. When they had to pursue a criminal the well-to-do inhabitants lent the police their rifles; and their horses, of course, were gaunt nags too ill-nourished to be a menace to anyone intent on escaping.

"That's what comes of being a federal republic," lamented Don Roque. "The States at least have their own police system. We in the territories who have to depend on the federal government for our protection, and are so far away from Buenos Aires that they forget all about us—there's nothing for us to do but trust to our wits for our safety."

"Yes, here we are, deserted, you might say," continued Don Roque, "turning into savages! After all, this is nothing but Patagonia, and it is only a few years ago that anything like civilisation began here at all. Meanwhile, the rest of the Argentine has forged ahead at a breathless pace in less than half a century. . . . *Pucha!* It's worth seeing just the same!"

For the moment they forgot their immediate worries



while they talked of that part of their country which, within their lifetimes, had progressed with such dizzying rapidity. But Don Roque had a jealous enthusiasm for Patagonia also.

"Desert though it is at this moment, you'll see it bloom yet, and in a short time from now too, when this soil begins to get water. And it's lucky for us that this land has such an ugly face. . . . If it hadn't, it would have been stolen from us long ago."

Wound up by his own words, he went on to tell how he had read in a magazine about that *gringo*, Charles Darwin, the same who had discovered how we had all come from monkeys. . . . He, too, it seemed, had wandered around these parts, when, as a youth, he had landed at Bahia Blanca, arriving there in a British frigate in which he was making a tour of the world. He had taken it into his head to study the plants and animals of the region, not an arduous task, there were so few specimens of either. Finally, in despair, he gave up his search for new flora and went away, leaving to this arid plateau the name "Land of Desolation."

"That was doing us a favour, if the *gringo* but knew it! Just as soon as people learn what this country is like when it's irrigated, the English are sure to take it from us! Didn't they take our *Islas Malvinas*, that they now call Falkland Islands?"

Rojas, too, began to talk of past times, lamenting the fact that his forbears had not been able to see where the true riches of the country lay. It had been their misfortune to become well-to-do before the generation of great and rapid fortune-making in the Argentine.

"It was in 1870 that the Government at Buenos Aires, growing weary of having the Indians still in a state of savagery, at its very gates, completed the work of the *Conquistadores*, by sending a military expedition out to the desert to take possession of twenty thousand leagues of land, practically all that was capable of cultivation.



"The Government sold that land for 1,500 *pesos* the league, and the *peso* in those days was worth only a few *centavos*. More than that, it allowed several years' time for payment, and even printed the names of purchasers in the official newspaper, declaring them 'well-deserving of the country.' The soldiers who had taken part in the expedition also received land as a reward for their services. It wasn't long before they sold the titles to their acres to the store-keepers in exchange for gin and canned food. And these are the lands that now supply wheat and beef to half the world! On them have arisen numberless villages and towns. To-day a league of land, which once cost a few cents, is worth millions. The owners of all this property have no other merit than that they kept their property, without cultivating it, and with no wish to sell it, waiting for the European immigration which would give it its value. My grandfather was already rich in those days and owned a big ranch. He didn't buy any of the new property. If he had only known!"

Rojas at the moment was quite forgetful of how he had squandered the better part of his inheritance; the thought of the enormous fortune his family might have amassed, had they been willing to take advantage of an opportunity provided by the rapid expansion of the country that so many others seized, fascinated and tormented him.

But at this point the conversation of the two Argentinians was interrupted by the arrival of Celinda, dutifully wearing her riding skirt. She came in to give her father a kiss, and greet the *comisario*. Taking advantage of the moment during which Don Carlos left them, to get a box of cigars, Don Roque said teasingly to the girl:

"Haven't I seen you wear a different riding suit when you were out on the *mesa*?"

Celinda smiled, at the same time indicating by a graceful little threatening gesture that he must be more discreet.



"Be careful," she said. "Don't let my old man hear you."

The two men lit their cigars and went on with their talk about Manos Duras, and how he was to be punished for his lawlessness. Celinda, knowing the conversation was likely to be a long one, hurried away from the ranch, demurely riding her horse with a side-saddle.

A half-hour later, however, she was cantering along the river bank, and mounted on a different horse. Suddenly she caught sight of a group of riders approaching, and stopped to reconnoitre.

Canterac, inspired by his desire to arouse the Marquésa's interest in him, had invited her to ride on the river path. It would, he believed, give her a heightened estimate of him when she saw the work that was being carried out under his directions. She would realise then that he was the real head of the enterprise, when she saw hundreds of men obeying his orders. . . .

Elena and the Frenchman were in the lead. Behind them rode Pirovani, who hadn't a very steady seat, and lurched about rather grotesquely on his saddle, making determined efforts, nevertheless, to get his horse between Elena's and the Frenchman's. Last of the cavalcade came the Marqués, Watson and Moreno.

As Elena and Canterac rode past Celinda, the two women looked at one another. The Marquésa smiled, as though eager to speak to the young girl; but with a childish frown, Celinda turned severe eyes on her.

"She's nothing but a girl," said Canterac, "a mischievous little thing, full of pranks—and, although she looks like a boy, I shouldn't wonder if she had it in her to turn any man's head. The people hereabouts call her Flor-de-Rio-Negro."

Elena, offended by the girl's attitude, looked haughtily at her.



"*Flor*, perhaps," she commented, "but a little too wild!"

And followed by her escort she rode on.

This brief conversation had been carried on in French, so that Celinda caught but a few words of it; but it was easy to guess that the Marquésa had said something disparaging, and Celinda did not restrain her impulse to express her scorn of the intruder by making a grimace at her unconscious back.

The other riders then drew near, and the Marqués ceremoniously greeted the young girl. Moreno, however, did not even see her, so intent was he in watching the group ahead. As for Richard Watson, he indicated by his manner that he intended riding on with the other members of the party; and he pretended not to understand Celinda's perfectly obvious gestures.

She let him go on, though she wore an expression of childish annoyance. Suddenly, however, she repented of her meekness, and pulling the reins wheeled her horse around and followed the group.

As she rode, her right hand suddenly caught up the lasso tied to the front of the saddle and threw it at the American. A tug at the rope . . . and Watson, to escape rolling out of the saddle, had to stop and turn his horse back; his companions meanwhile rode on unaware of his capture.

The thong still tight about his shoulders, Richard rode up to the girl; he was too much annoyed to free himself and ride away; better have it out!

"Come here," she said smiling, as she drew in the rope. "Tell me what you mean by going round with that woman—without my permission!"

In a voice betraying his annoyance, Watson replied sharply:

"You have no rights over me, Señorita Rojas! I shall go about with anyone I like!"



Celinda grew pale. She had not expected that tone. But very quickly she recovered herself, and imitating the young man's serious manner, she replied :

" Mr. Watson, I have over you this right at least. I do care about what happens to you, and I don't like to see you in bad company ! "

Conquered by the girl's comic seriousness, young Watson burst out laughing ; and then Celinda laughed too.

" You know how I am, *gringuito* . . . I don't like to see you with that woman. Anyway, she's too old for you. . . . Swear to me that you'll do what I ask—or I won't let you go ! "

Watson swore solemnly, with hand up-raised, and making determined efforts to preserve his solemnity. Celinda loosened the rope and the two young people set off in the opposite direction to that taken by Elena and her party.

Since the day when the Frenchman had shown the Marquésa the engineering works at the dam, somewhat boastfully exhibiting his authority over the workmen, Pirovani had felt that he had lost ground ; and he was eager at any cost to regain it.

An inspiration came to him one morning, as he leaned on his elbow over the railing of his balcony. He knew now how to steal a march on his rival ! Within half an hour one of the Italian's foremen was in conference with his employer.

This fellow, a Chilian, crafty, ingenious in finding a way out of tight places, was frequently called upon by the contractor to handle difficult missions for him. He was known as " the Friar " by his compatriots, an allusion to his sojourn during one period of his adventurous life with the Dominicans at Valparaiso. As a result of this experience, he not only knew how to read and write ; he



had also acquired a taste for unusual words, which he rendered more unusual still by stressing their syllables to his own taste. Soft-voiced and courteous-mannered, he peppered his conversation with poetic phrases. A little incident of two fatal knife thrusts administered to a friend had caused him to abandon his native land.

Foreseeing that his master's summons would mean a long journey, he had ridden over on his excellent mare. As he dismounted, Pirovani came out, and gave his henchman a vigorous slap on the shoulder by way of indicating the affectionate confidence he felt in him.

"Listen, *roto*," said the contractor, adopting the Chilians' own ironical nickname for themselves: "I want you to get to the station as fast as you can. The train for Buenos Aires will go through in two hours, and you are going to take it."

In spite of his half-breed impassivity, the Friar could not suppress a gesture of astonishment at hearing that he was being sent to the capital.

"Just as soon as you get there," Pirovani continued, "give this list to my agent, Fernando—you know him. Tell him he is to buy these things at once, and give you the packages. You are to take the next train back. I expect you to make the round trip in five days."

The Chilean listened with utmost gravity to these commands. He concluded from his employer's manner that the mission being entrusted to him must be of tremendous importance, and felt agreeably flattered at having been chosen to accomplish it.

Pirovani thrust a fistful of bills into his hand and bade him good-bye, turning his back on him with the brisk satisfaction of a general who has just commanded the manoeuvres sure to bring a quick and decisive victory.

With a frown indicative of profound thought, the Friar went down the steps.



"This must be an order for steel for 'the works,'" he reflected. "Or perhaps he's sending me for money. . . ."

Seeing that Pirovani had retired into his cottage, he gave up his attempt to think out a reason for his errand, deeming it simpler to open the envelope entrusted to him. Then he stood in the middle of the street reading the papers it contained.

His first glance at the several lines of the document did not enlighten him.

"One dozen bottles of '*Jardin Florido*' "

"*Idem*, '*Nymphs and Undines*' "

"Six dozen boxes of '*Moonlight Soap*' " . . . .

The bewildered foreman went on with the remaining pages of the thick packet. He was beginning to understand ; but the more he understood, the greater was his astonishment. Was it for this that he was being sent to Buenos Aires with orders to return at once. . . . ?

"Holy smoke !" he muttered, "this can't all be for one female ! There's enough here for the Grand Turk's harem !"

But, as the prospect of a trip to Buenos Aires pleased him, even though he would be able to remain there only a few hours, he cheerfully mounted his horse, and galloped off hot-foot to the station.

Of all the Marquésa's nightly callers, the calmest, to judge by appearances, was Moreno. As his work kept him busy only about one day a week, he spent the rest of the time reading in the window of the frame house where he had set up his office. He was a greedy and insatiable reader, devouring two and sometimes three novels daily. His passion for novels of all kinds was one of long standing ; it had grown worse in the many hours of solitude he spent at La Presa. He had no distraction of any kind but his novels when everybody else went away to work in the morning, leaving him alone in his rustic office.



It was after the arrival of the Torre Blancas that his literary preferences, up to that time not clearly formulated, took definite shape. He determined to read nothing but those tales the scene of which was the so-called world of fashion, and whose heroes and heroines were supposedly personages of high society. Moreover, now that he was rubbing elbows with some of the most distinguished representatives of Parisian *high-life*, he could judge of whether these novels were true descriptions of the subject they attempted to treat, or not.

At times he would stop reading and look up at the ceiling with an ecstatic expression, while a desire whispered in his brain :

“ Oh to be the hero of such a story ! Oh to be loved by a great lady ! ”

One afternoon when Moreno was least expecting him, Canterac appeared at his door on horseback. As a rule, he was at that time of day at the dam. Something unusual must have happened . . . the captain would not be likely, otherwise, to come and see him.

The horseman rode up to the window and shook hands with Moreno. With military abruptness, avoiding all preambles, he began :

“ I wanted to talk to you a minute before to-night so you can get a letter off in to-day's mail . . . It's about a present for the Marquésa. Poor woman, in this desert of ours she has none of the things she's accustomed to, and if you remember, a few weeks ago she happened to mention that she misses perfumes so much. . . . ”

The engineer took some papers out of a leather wallet, and gave them to Moreno.

“ I clipped these out of some catalogues that the Galician fellow at the store gave me. Of course, it took him a while to get them for me from Buenos Aires. I should have had them three days ago, so as to send the order by the other



train. But, to come to the point. . . . You have a lot of friends in Buenos Aires . . . won't you get one of them to buy these things for me? And take the money out of my pay for the month. . . ."

Moreno with a nod, took the catalogue clippings.

"I hope Pirovani won't get ahead of me in this matter," Canterac went on. "The fellow is more insufferable every day."

When the captain went back to the dam, Moreno began to examine the catalogue lists and prices; his eyes grew round with amazement; in fact, they became almost as round and blank as the shell-rimmed glasses covering them.

For the list marked was a long one; it contained not only perfumery, but all kinds of toilet articles. Evidently, the captain had plunged into the catalogue as though it were a newly discovered continent, appropriating everything he encountered.

"All this mounts up to more than a thousand *pesos*," said the paymaster to himself. "And Canterac's pay is only 800 *pesos* a month."

Methodical and prudent as he was, a man of figures and accounts, he felt outraged at this lack of balance between income and expenditure. But after a little reflection he began to smile to himself. After all, this lavishness was easy to understand, the Marquésa was so charming . . . and she couldn't be expected to live like an ordinary woman!

But all the rest of the afternoon Moreno was uneasy; he couldn't keep his attention on the novel he held in his hands. It would waver and slowly sink to the table in front of him, thickly strewn with business papers. Finally, with a frown, he picked up a sheet of writing paper and, with the expression of a child fearful of being caught telling a fib, he began to write:



“DEAR CLARA,

“As soon as you get this, send me the dress coat I had made when we were married. Things have changed here considerably. Quite important persons are coming this way now and there are a good many parties given for them. Naturally, I want to make as good an appearance as anybody else. It’s really quite important for my advancement that I should. . . .”

Here Moreno scratched his head with his pen handle ; then, with a remorseful expression, he went on writing until he had covered all four pages of his letter paper.

Every evening now at the Marquésa’s *tertulias*, Pirovani betrayed the indecision and preoccupation of one who has something on his mind of which he must speak, but whose emotions get the better of him before he can begin.

After a week of hesitancy, however, he decided to postpone his offer no longer ; as it happened, he reached this decision precisely on the evening when Moreno counted on enjoying one of the most triumphant moments of his life.

Elena was wearing one of those evening dresses of hers the effect of which she was constantly varying by the addition or removal of some ornament so that her costumes always appeared new. Canterac and Torre Bianca wore dinner dress, and Pirovani was displaying the majestic cut of his swallow-tail. But, alas ! he was no longer the only one to be so arrayed ; for, at the last moment, Moreno had arrived wearing the evening clothes sent down by his wife. It was true that his clothes were modest enough, and somewhat the worse for numerous years of service and moth balls. But still they were formal evening dress, and robbed the contractor of the distinction of being the only guest present to be thus attired ; as a consequence, Pirovani was so nervous that he chattered like a magpie.

Watson and Robledo had compromised with their sur-



roundings by putting on dark suits ; they felt obliged to change their clothes every evening now so as not to strike too glaring a note in the picture of incongruous elegance that was being created out of respect for Elena's presence.

Watson was tired out by his day's work ; he was pre-occupied, moreover, with thinking of the meeting he had had in the late afternoon with Celinda near her father's ranch. Finally, after several more or less disguised yawns, he got up to go to his own quarters. Elena could not conceal her annoyance when he returned her look of cordial interest with a coolly courteous bow, as though he could well afford to leave her charming presence without the slightest regret.

At that very moment, however, as Canterac was engaged in conversation with the Marqués, and as Moreno was discussing something with Robledo, Pirovani seized his opportunity.

"I haven't dared say anything before, Marquésa, but now I feel that I must. . . . This frame is unworthy of your beauty and elegance. . . ."

He gave a depreciative glance about at the room and its furnishings.

"If you like, my house is at your disposal from to-morrow on. It is yours, Marquésa. I can live in the house of one of my employees."

Elena did not betray great astonishment. One might have said that she had been expecting this offer for a long time, or even that she had been subtly suggesting it to the contractor. However, she went through various gestures of protest, at the same time smiling at Pirovani, and letting her glance rest caressingly on him.

Finally, she weakened before his arguments, and promised to consider the suggestion and consult her husband about it ; she could not decide alone. . . .



While Robledo and Watson were at work the next day, she kept her promise.

In spite of the submissiveness with which Torre Bianca usually accepted his wife's suggestions, he indicated in no uncertain terms that this particular one scandalised him. Certainly he could not accept Pirovani's generosity !

"What will people think of his giving up his own house to us ? Everyone knows that he takes such enjoyment in it !"

No ; he shook his head emphatically. Besides, all his class-feeling awoke at the thought of being under obligations to a man, for whom he felt no dislike, it is true, but whose tastes he considered rather vulgar.

But Elena became irritable.

"Your friend Robledo is constantly doing us favours, and yet it doesn't seem to occur to you that people might think that strange ! Why do you think it so extraordinary that a new friend should express his interest in us by letting us live in his house ?"

And Torre Bianca, who was so accustomed to yield on every occasion to his wife's wishes, felt himself yielding once more at these words ; nevertheless, he persisted for a while longer in voicing his objections to the idea, so that finally, by way of settling the matter, Elena said :

"Of course, I understand your scruples . . . but it isn't as though the house were being given to us . . . it is simply rented. I insisted on that point to Pirovani. You will pay him when the irrigation project begins to bring us in some money."

With a gesture of resignation, the Marqués surrendered. Particularly noticeable at the moment was his air of discouragement ; and he looked aged and sick, as though some secret malady was eating away his life. . .

"Do as you like. I have no desire but to see you happy."

The following day Elena called on Pirovani. It had



been arranged that she was to see the house, and look it over thoroughly, before moving.

The contractor, pale with emotion at being alone with her at last, received her at the head of the stairs, and escorted her through the various rooms. Elena, playing her part as mistress of the establishment, at once ordered certain pieces of furniture to be moved about ; the Italian, meanwhile, overcome with admiration of her taste, looked significantly at Sebastiana the housekeeper ; he wanted her too to share his ecstasy over the titled lady's exquisite discrimination.

Finally, they reached the bedroom that was to be Elena's henceforth. On the dressing table and chairs, spread out in every available space, were innumerable packages all carefully wrapped in tissue paper, tied with ribbon, and sealed ; and about each package hovered an aroma of flowers and spices. Pirovani was opening them eagerly, revealing dozens of flasks of perfumes, and boxes of delicate and extravagant soaps, as well as handsome toilet articles ; all the enormous order, in fact, brought from Buenos Aires, and that now with its gilded labels, its gorgeously lined cases, its glittering cut glass, caressed the eye and at the same time flattered the sense of smell with its perfumes suggestive of all the marvellous blossoms of a Persian garden.

Elena passed from surprise to amazement ; finally she burst out laughing, uttering exclamations of amusement not untinged with mockery.

"How generous of you ! But there's enough here to start a perfume shop !"

Pirovani, quite white by this time, and growing bolder under the Marquésa's smiles, tried to get possession of her hand. But Elena, with a malicious look in her dark eyes, checkmated him at once.

"I know that this is a real present," she said "and,



that you are not like those vulgar men who sell their gifts . . . You want nothing from me but appreciation, I am sure ! ”

Then, taking pity on the Italian's embarrassment—alas ! he had, as well he knew, laid himself open to the charge of vulgarity, according to the Marquésa's definition—she extended her right hand graciously towards his lips.

“ That is for you,” she said.

But he had not yet learned how to kiss a lady's hand with the proper mixture of fervour and restraint ; and Elena, abruptly putting an end to his homage, shook her finger at him. . . .

They went on then to the other rooms of the house, and the contractor, as though repentant of his audacity, meekly followed his guest about ; and yet there were moments when he wished he had been more audacious still ; but above his conflicting sentiments persisted a sense of triumph. The Marquésa's white and fragrant hand had actually been offered to his lips, and with what a gesture !

Ah, what a good fortune to be able to offer a woman like that a house, and servants, and the luxurious articles so indispensable to her comfort ! . . . With a smile Pirovani contemplated his recent success, and dreamed of others to come . . . .



## CHAPTER VIII.

PIROVANI'S house took an entirely new appearance after the Torre Blancas moved in. The window panes shone now, and through them could be seen new and gay-coloured curtains. The servants no longer lolled about the verandah, unkempt and dirty, performing their household duties in full sight of the street. The presence of the beautiful and elegant new mistress of the house had inspired them all to make some effort at least to present a less untidy appearance. Even the fat Sebastiana "wore her Sunday clothes every day," as her friends put it.

The community around the dam enjoyed other novelties too, after Elena had taken possession of the contractor's bungalow. There was in Pirovani's parlour a semi-grand piano which until then had remained locked. It represented a purchase the Italian had made in Buenos Aires to oblige a friend who had invested too much money in his stock of musical instruments. Besides, the contractor had heard that no parlour was complete without a piano, but of course he had always thought he would have one with perpendicular cords and an upright case. However, on his friend's recommendation he had purchased the handsome instrument although he had small hope that any one would ever come to the dam who would prove capable of playing it.

Elena, however, paid it a great deal of attention, sitting in front of it for hours at a time, letting her fingers run up and down the keyboard, while the "romances" she had learned when she was a young girl came back to her; but invariably she interrupted them to dash off a fragment of



the popular music she had heard in Paris before she came away.

Inspired by this evocation of her more youthful past, she sometimes added her voice to that of the instrument. When this happened, Sebastiana and the other servants left their work in the corral or the balconies, and cautiously creeping nearer and nearer the drawing-room, listened with softened expressions and glances of admiration, to the sounds issuing from it, subdued like the creatures of the wood who listened to Orpheus' lyre.

The neighbours, too, yielded to the spell. As soon as it was night and the workmen had finished their meal, the women and children would start out for Pirovani's. Squatting on the ground at a little distance, they would gaze eagerly at the windows that glowed red from the lamp within. If some of the children grew impatient and began their own games again, their mothers would cry out :

"Be still, you little gallows-birds, the lady's going to sing !"

And an almost religious emotion passed through them at the sound of the piano keys and Elena's voice ; for the melody that penetrated through the wooden walls to the crowd in the dark street seemed a message from another world ; so many of them had, for years, heard no music but that of twanging guitars at the *boliche*.

Then, impelled by admiration and twinges of desire, some of the workmen would join the groups in the street. They were the same men who looked with indifference at the girl from the Rojas ranch with her boy's clothes and boy's ways ; but this woman, when she rode by in her trim riding skirt, aroused their enthusiasm. What a woman, the Marquésa de Torre Bianca ! Some curyes about her !

And, as they listened to her singing, they stood gaping with sensuous delight, firmly believing that only a beautiful woman could sing like that.



A week after the Torre Blancas had moved into their new quarters, Sebastiana announced to her friends that henceforth the Señora Marquésa was going to be at home once a week just like the great ladies in Buenos Aires. This announcement was made in such fashion that the gossips of La Presa took it into their heads that these weekly parties were going to be extraordinary occasions. Scarcely was dinner over on the appointed night, when the groups began to gather before the illuminated windows. Some of the women stood with hands raised to their ears so as to hear better, and they did not hesitate, by means of severe elbow thrusts, to impose silence on their chattering neighbours.

While her guests were arriving, Elena, at the piano, was singing sentimental lyrics of a bygone period.

The first to present themselves were Canterac and Moreno. The latter, in order to complete his evening attire, had thought it necessary to don a silk hat. Pirovani could top off his dress suit with a crush hat if he liked! All the same, the Marquésa who was a woman of such distinction, couldn't help noticing things like that! . . . Details of course, but how quickly they betrayed bad taste!

As Canterac stood on the first step of the stairway, he said to his companion:

"I oughtn't to go into this house, belonging as it does to that schemer Pirovani, whom I thoroughly detest. But I was afraid the Marquésa wouldn't like it if I didn't come to her party."

Moreno, the friend of everybody, and incapable of animosity, took up the defence of the absent contractor.

"But that Italian is a good fellow! I am certain he likes you very much."

Canterac's reply to these conciliating words was a threatening gesture.

"The fellow, tactless as he is, seems to take pains to cross my path. . . . There's something coming to him. . . ."



They entered the house and the Marqués came forward to welcome them. Then they passed into the drawing-room, where all three men stood waiting, while Elena went on with her song as though she had not heard them come in.

As he approached the bungalow, Robledo broke into a smile at sight of Pirovani in a new fur overcoat, and a brand new top hat, ordered from Bahia Blanca for this occasion,—as though some familiar spirit had informed him of his friend Moreno's disparaging thoughts!

From the groups of curiosity-seekers, half-hidden in the shadow, came bursts of laughter and whispers. Some of them were making fun of the tube of shining silk which the contractor had put on his head; others were admiring it, their starved vanity making them feel that somehow this high silk hat was adding to the importance of the life that all led out there in the desert.

"Here I am, a visitor in my own house," said Pirovani laughing, and as though startled by the extravagant novelty of his performance.

"You made a mistake in giving it up," replied Robledo drily.

Pirovani assumed a superior air.

"You must admit, my dear fellow, that your quarters weren't quite the proper place for a lady, at least a lady of such distinction. . . . Even though I never went to college, I know what a man with any claims to being anybody owes to such a woman, and that's why. . . ."

With a shrug, Robledo moved on as though he did not wish to hear further. The contractor puffed along behind him, and, pointing towards the glowing windows, he exclaimed in a transport of enthusiasm:

"What a voice! What an artist, eh?"

Once more Robledo shrugged, and then both men went into the house.



On reaching the drawing-room, they joined the other three men who were standing there, listening. No sooner had Elena uttered the last note than the contractor burst into applause amid loud exclamations of enthusiasm. Canterac, Robledo, and Moreno, although less explosively, also expressed their admiration, each in his own fashion.

It at once became evident that in the new house the gatherings were going to be less simple and austere than in Robledo's lodgings. Sebastiana, who held firmly to the opinion that *mate* was the remedy for every kind of infirmity, as well as the supreme delight of the human palate, was forced to serve cups of boiling water with a thing called *tea* in it to the guests. . . . The two little half-breed servants followed shyly in Sebastiana's wake, bearing sugar and cakes.

Under pretext of attending to the serving of the refreshments, Elena came and went among those guests of hers, whose eyes avidly followed her about as she balanced her cup, sometimes spilling a little of its contents on the saucer. Her three privileged admirers tried to engage her in conversation; but, gently evading them, she always brought it about that sooner or later, they found themselves carrying on a dialogue with her husband. . . . Meanwhile, she was in pursuit of the only man who, so it seemed, cared nothing about talking to her, and who had been silent most of the evening. Finally, by a skilful manœuvre she found herself sitting at the far end of the room with Robledo beside her.

"Evidently Watson didn't care to come," Elena was saying. "I am more firmly convinced every day that he doesn't like me, and I sometimes think that you don't like me very much either. . . ."

Robledo remonstrated, more in gestures than words, at this accusation; but as Elena was pleased to make herself



out the victim of an unjust antipathy on the part of the two business associates, the Spaniard finally replied :

"Watson and I are your husband's friends, and on his account it alarms us to see how lightly you arouse certain equivocal hopes in all these men who come to see you."

Elena began to laugh, as if pleased by Robledo's words and the grave tone in which he uttered them.

"You needn't worry about that. A woman of experience, who knows the world as I know it, isn't likely to compromise herself with any of these people you speak of."

And she cast an ironic glance at her three admirers who were still sitting beside her husband.

"Of course, I do not allow myself to make any suppositions," Robledo continued in the same tone. "I simply see the present, just as in Paris I saw . . . and I am a little worried about the future."

Elena could not decide, as she looked at the engineer, whether to continue to treat the subject lightly or to become angry. Finally, she took up the dialogue again with the grave expression of one who has been offended by the tone of the discussion.

"I do not think myself better or worse than other women. It is simply that I was born to live in luxury, and I have never in my whole life met anyone able to give me all that I wanted."

During a long pause they looked at one another ; then she added :

"The men who wanted to win me could never give me all that I need in life ; and those who might have satisfied my desires never noticed me."

She lowered her head as though her courage had suddenly abandoned her.

"You have no idea what my life has been. . . . I need wealth, I cannot live without money ; and I spent the best part of my youth running after it . . . uselessly ! Just as I



thought I held it in my hand, it vanished, to reappear again farther on . . . Again I had to give chase . . . and again . . . Always the same story ! ”

She was silent for a few moments, assembling her thoughts ; then she added, as though making a confession :

“ Men cannot understand the anxieties and desires of the women of to-day. We need so much more to live on than the women of former times ! An automobile and a pearl necklace are the modern woman’s uniform. Without them, any woman who thinks at all knows that she is unhappy, helpless. . . . Sometimes I had these indispensable articles, but I never felt sure of them . . . there was always the prospect of losing them the next day. And we all need to hope, don’t we, in order to live ? So I am living on the hope now that my husband will make a fortune . . . even though I cannot foresee when that might happen. Yet even so, it is enough to help me stand this horrible exile.”

Then, in a tone of discouragement she went on :

“ And what is he likely to make ? Cents perhaps, where you make thousands of *pesos* ! No . . . I ought never to have married Federico ! ”

She raised her head and smiled sadly at Robledo.

“ Perhaps it would have meant happiness for me to have met a man like you, spirited, energetic, able to master his destiny. And you, to become all that you had it in you to be, ought to have had a woman to inspire you. . . . ”

It was now Robledo’s turn to smile.

“ It is a little late to talk of that.”

But she looked at him obstinately while she protested at his words. Is it ever too late for anything while one lives ? And there are men of such supreme energy that they are like tropical regions where death is known but not old age, and they are forever renewing themselves, like the springtime. They have that commanding will which imagination obeys ; and imagination is the artist who touches



up the dull grey canvas of existence with the colours of his crazy palette. . . .

Elena's face was close to him, her eyes searching his. For a moment he was troubled. Then, with a gesture of negation, he took possession of himself.

"What you say, my dear friend, is very interesting. But men who are really energetic do not care to be revived to false springtimes. That always brings complications."

As they went on talking, she alluded again to her past experiences.

"If I were to tell you my life! Of course, every woman cherishes the belief that her history needs only to be adequately told in order to make the most interesting novel ever written. I don't pretend that my experiences have invariably been interesting. But they have made me unhappy because there was always such a disproportion between what I thought I deserved and what life gave me."

She paused, as if a painful thought had suggested itself.

"Don't think that I am one of those *parvenus* who hunger for the pleasures and comforts that they have never enjoyed. Quite the contrary! I need luxury and money in order to live, because I had them when I was a child. Then, when I was a young girl, I was very poor. What struggles I went through to win my way back to the position I had formerly occupied! The position I had been educated to. . . . And the struggle never ends. . . . All kinds of catastrophes repeat themselves until I am sick of them. . . . and all the while I am farther and farther away from the place that should belong to me in life. Here I am now, in one of the most God-forsaken corners of the earth, leading an existence that must be very like that of the people who lived in the most primitive times. . . . And yet you blame me!"

Robledo took up his own defence.

"I am your friend, and your husband's. When I see you heading in a wrong direction, I merely give you some



good advice. The game you are playing with these men is a dangerous one."

He indicated clearly enough that he was talking about the men sitting at the other end of the room with Torre Bianca.

"Moreover, before you came, life here was monotonous, it is true, but it was at least peaceful and fraternal. Now your presence seems to have changed these men. They look at one another with scarcely concealed hostility, and I am afraid that their rivalry, which up to the present is merely childish, will sooner or later take a turn toward the tragic. You forget that we are living far removed from other human groups, and this isolation makes us by slow degrees revert to barbarism. Our passions, domesticated as they are in city life, lose their manners here, and run wild. Take care! It is dangerous to play with them as though they were feeble toys."

She laughed at his fears; and there was in her laugh something scornful. She couldn't understand such love of caution in a strong man.

"You must let me have my court! I need to have people who admire me about me, or I can't live. . . . Yes, like a pampered actress, if you like. What would become of me if I couldn't have the fun of coquetting and flirting?"

Then frowning, and in an irritable voice she inquired:

"What else is there to do here, will you tell me? You have your work, your battle with the river, your contests from time to time with the workmen. All day long I am bored to death. On some of those interminable afternoons I cannot get away from the thought of killing myself . . . and it is only when night finally arrives and these admirers of mine come to see me, that I find this desert endurable. In some other part of the world I should laugh at them, but here I find them interesting. They are my only comfort in this horrible loneliness. . . ."



With a mocking smile she looked in the direction of the three men ; and then she added :

“ Don’t worry, Robledo. I am not likely to lose my head over any one of them. I know what I am doing.”

And, somewhat bitterly, she compared herself to a traveller on the Patagonian table-lands who, with only one cartridge in his revolver, might be attacked by several of the vagabonds who prowl about in the mountains. If he were to fire he would be rid of only one enemy, and leave himself quite defenceless against the attacks of the others. Wasn’t it better to prolong the situation, and threaten them all without firing ?

“ You needn’t fear that I shall take any one of these men for my lover. They are not the kind to lose one’s head over. But even though some of them should interest me, I would be cautious, for fear of what the others might say and do when they found that there was no chance for them. It’s far better to keep them all restlessly happy with hope.”

And, noticing that her prolonged conversation with Robledo was arousing uneasiness among the other visitors, and in fact quite scandalising them, she got up and moved towards them. All three at once came towards her, surrounding her as though they were going to fight with one another for each one of her words and gestures.

It was after midnight when the Marquésa’s first *tertulia* came to an end. The lateness of the hour was unprecedented in the social annals of La Presa. It was only on those Saturday nights when the workmen received their bi-monthly pay that some of the Galician’s customers stayed out as late as that, and usually it was because they couldn’t get home.

All next day Sebastiana went about half asleep, and with lagging feet, for she had got up at dawn as usual, in spite of having stayed up the night before until the last guest had gone.

She stood on the balcony scolding one of the little half-



breeds, who, "with all her noise was going to wake up the mistress," when suddenly she seemed to forget her anger, and stood, one hand over her eyes, peering at the street. A horse was rearing there, too abruptly reined in by his rider, who was quite carelessly waving a hand at the voluble housekeeper.

"My *señorita*. . . . I never know her with those clothes ! How is my little one ? "

And hastily she clambered down the steps and crossed the street to welcome Celinda Rojas.

Mistress and servant had not met since the day Sebastiana had left the ranch. Out of spite for Don Rojas, the half-breed made haste to enumerate all the advantages of her new position.

"It's a fine house I'm in, *señorita mia* ! No offence to your own, of course. Money flows through it like water in the irrigation ditch. And the mistress is a fine *gringa*. They say she was born a Marquésa over there in her country. The Italian fellow, they say too, is a demon with his workmen, but he seems half foolish over the Señora Marquésa, and he takes good care that she lacks for nothing. Last night we had a party with music. I thought of my pretty dove when I heard it, and I said to myself : ' How my little mistress would love to hear this Marquésa sing ! ' "

Celinda nodded as she listened, as though what she heard excited her curiosity, making her eager to hear more.

Meanwhile Sebastiana, so as further to impress her, went on to enumerate the guests who had been present at the party.

"Haven't you forgotten some one ?" the girl asked when Sebastiana came to a pause. "Wasn't Don Ricardo there, the young man who works with Don Manuel, the engineer ? "

The half-breed shook her head.

"No. I never once the whole evening long saw the *gringo*."



Then she burst out laughing, slapping the enormous muscles of her thighs, which served to bring them into still greater relief under the thin stuff of her skirt.

"I knew it, *mi nina*, I knew it! I've heard how you and the *gringo* are always riding around together, and how not a day goes by that you don't see each other. But if ever you give him your lips to kiss, little one, be sure to pick out a spot where no one can see you, to do it in. These people around here talk too much; it's meat and drink to them. And don't forget that those folks down at the river have very long spectacles, and they can see for miles and miles. . ."

Celinda blushed, and at the same time protested at her nurse's insinuations.

"Yes, he's a fine young man," the half-breed went on. "That Don Ricardo is a handsome *gringo*, and he'd make a grand husband for you if Don Carlos, with his contrary nature, doesn't stand in the way of your marrying him. When these *gringos* from America don't drink, they make fine husbands. I had a friend who married one of them, and she leads him about by the nose. And I know another one who . . ."

But Celinda wasn't interested in Sebastiana's friends, and interrupted her.

"So Don Ricardo wasn't here last night?"

"Neither last night nor any other night. I've never seen him around here at all."

Sebastiana looked at the girl with a gleam of amusement in her eyes, while a good-natured smile spread over her wide, copper-coloured face.

"So you're a little bit jealous, child? No need to blush about that. We're all the same when we're in love with a man. The first thing we think about is that some one is going to take him away from us. . . . But you've no reason to worry about that. . . . A pearl the like of you, *nina mia*! The lady in the house there is handsome too, especi-



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ally when she's just finished doing her hair, and putting all those things that smell so good and that came all the way from Buenos Aires on her face. . . . But, when you are in the game, what hope has she? Didn't I see my little girl here, come into the world, you might say? and I'll bet the Señora Marquésa can't remember when she was born."

Then, as a result of her own thoughts, she considered it well to add :

"To tell the truth, I don't think the Marquésa is so old, as that—but anyone would *seem* old alongside of you, precious! We can't all be rosebuds!"

She stopped talking for a moment while she looked about, and then, lowering her voice, and standing on the tips of her toes, she said, as joyfully as any gossip who has found someone to whom to impart a tit-bit :

"You must know, pretty one, that there are plenty of them running after her . . . but Don Ricardo is none of those! The poor *gringo* has enough on his hands looking after you, my jasmine-blossom! The others are all chasing after the Marquésa like ostriches . . . the captain, and the Italian, and the Government fellow, the one who always carries so many papers. . . . All of them off their heads and bristling at sight of one another, like so many dogs. The husband never sees a thing . . . and she laughs at them all and has a good time making them squirm. . . . To tell the truth, I don't think she cares a *picayune* for any one of the whole lot that comes to the house."

But Celinda's uneasiness was not set at rest by these words. On the contrary, she protested mentally :

"How can Richard Watson be compared with these people?"

Then she felt that she must express a part, at least, of what she was thinking.

"It may be true," she observed, "that she doesn't care



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much about the others, but Richard is younger than any of them, and I know that these women who have run about a lot in the world, and are beginning to grow old . . . well, they're often very capricious ! ”



## CHAPTER IX

THE notorious Manos Duras lived on an elevation of the *mesa* from which he could see the distant limits of Patagonia, on the far horizon, and below, the wide, twisting curves of the river, beyond which stretched one end of the Rojas ranch.

His ranch-house, of *adobe*, was surrounded by other huts, or hovels, and a few corrals fenced in by old stockades, but only on rare occasions were any cattle to be found in them.

Everyone in the country knew where the ranch of Manos Duras was located; but very few ever cared to visit it, for the region had a bad name. Sometimes those who with a certain trepidation passed near by, felt reassured when they saw how solitary the place was. On the road leading up to the ranch house there were none of those barking and leaping long-haired dogs with bloodshot eyes and pointed ears who usually accompany the cowboy. Nor were any horses to be seen nibbling at the sparse grass in the corrals.

Manos Duras was away. Possibly he was roving up and down the banks of the Colorado, where cattle were more abundant than along the Rio Negro. Or possibly he was roaming among the spurs of the Andes, going to pay a visit to his friends in the Bolson valley, settled, for the most part, by Chilian adventurers, or on his way to make a call on his acquaintances along the shores of the Andean lakes. These excursions of his to the mountains were usually undertaken for the purpose of disposing, in Chile, of the cattle he had "rustled" in the Argentine.

But at other times the Manos Duras ranch contained an extraordinary diversity of inhabitants. Wandering *gauchos*



like himself took up their quarters in the *adobe* huts for weeks at a time without anyone ever discovering for a certainty where they came from nor where they were going.

The *comisario* of La Presa was beginning to feel uneasy about these mysterious visitors. He got little rest, for not a night went by that he did not fear that some scandalous depredation might occur. Yet day after day passed, and nothing happened to ruffle the calm of the settlement and its outskirts. At the *gaucho*'s ranch numerous head of cattle were sold and skinned, and Manos Duras provided the whole region with meat. But, as no complaints of theft reached him, Don Roque refrained from any investigation as to the source of the bandit's flocks and herds.

Then one fine morning the *gaucho*'s companions disappeared, and Manos Duras continued living in solitude on his ranch ; at last, he too disappeared for a while, to the *comisario*'s infinite relief.

Suddenly, he reappeared again, with three companions, evil-looking specimens out of whom no one could get a word. At the Galician's, it was asserted that they came from a distant valley of the mountain chain.

"They're three good fellows who are out of luck," said the *gaucho*. "Three pals of mine who are going to live up at the ranch until the white-livered rotters down yonder get through telling lies about them."

One day of intense heat, Manos Duras sprang on his horse to go up to La Presa to make some purchases.

The Patagonian summer had begun with the violent ardour it displays in lands rarely cooled by rain, but where the winter temperatures go down to many degrees below zero. The parching soil seemed to tremble under the intensity of the sun's hot brilliance. So strong was the radiation that straight lines took on a wave-motion in the



dazzling glare, and the outlines of the mountains, the buildings and the people in the streets became oddly changed. These tricks of the blinding light doubled or even trebled the objects in the scene, giving the impression that this desert land was a region of lakes, where everything was reflected on a series of glittering surfaces. The mirages of the desert, these, which attract the attention of even the sons of the soil, so odd and capricious are the forms which these optical illusions assume.

Far in the distance, behind the deep gash cut by the river, almost on a level with the horizon line, lay what looked like a long, dark-coloured worm with a tuft of cotton on its head.

Manos Duras stopped short to look at it. That was not the day on which the mail train usually came in from Buenos Aires.

"It must be a freight from Bahia Blanca," he said to himself.

He could make it out quite plainly although it was still many miles away from La Presa, and it had as many miles again to go before it would stop at Fuerte Sarmiento. In this land the power of vision seemed enormously increased; the retina seemed capable here of enclosing a vast extent of territory; here distance seemed to have lost its significance. It meant little compared with the importance it assumed in other parts of the world.

After gazing a few seconds at the slowly-moving train miles away, the *gaucho* started off once more at a gallop. To shorten the way, he was accustomed to ride through the out-lying part of the Rojas ranch, which stretched between his land and the settlement beyond. With the coolness that was so characteristic of him, he turned his horse down a trail that only a practised eye could have discovered between the tough *matorral* brush.

But Don Rojas was also at that hour riding about his



property, looking it over and making calculations for the future.

The part of his estate that was on the plateau would never amount to anything, he reflected. That beggared soil could never provide fodder for more than a very limited number of cattle. His herds were "*criollos*," as he called them disparagingly; that is to say, they were spare, heavy-boned beasts, hard-hoofed, with clumsy horns; in short, they were adapted to their rigorous surroundings, and could get along on sparse pasturage; these were the degenerate descendants of the cattle that, centuries before, the Spanish colonists had brought over in their small sailing vessels.

He was thinking regretfully of the prize herds of his father's estate, of the huge steers, flat-backed as your hand, short-horned, the solid flesh fairly bursting through their sleek hides—mountains of beefsteak, as he called them. . . . Then he began thinking of the miracle that was to be wrought on his lands below when the irrigation ditches brought them the water that was to transform them, releasing their fertility. . . . Alfalfa would flourish there as in the land of Canaan, and here, along the banks of the Rio Negro, he would be able at last to reproduce the marvels of scientific breeding accomplished on the ranches near Buenos Aires; then, instead of thin, hard-hided "*criollos*" he would have herds of the finest cattle, the product of crossing the best breeds to be found anywhere in the world. With all the delight of an artist in polishing off his creations, Don Carlos brooded over this transformation that in his mind's eye he saw taking place on his barren ranch, when suddenly he perceived a rider approaching him. .

He raised his hand to shade his eyes, and could scarcely contain himself when he saw who it was.

"By the . . . what? That robber, Maños Duras!"

The *gaucho*, as he drew near, raised his hand to his sombrero, in greeting, then spurred his horse ahead.



After a moment of hesitation, Don Carlos also started off at top speed, cut across the *gaucho's* path, and obliged him to stop.

"Who gave you permission to come on my property?" he shouted in a voice that was shrill and shaking with anger.

Manos Duras made no attempt to reply, merely looking at the rancher with the same silent insolence he used towards others. His bold eyes, however, avoided meeting those of Don Carlos. As though offering excuses, he replied in a low tone that he was aware of the fact that he had no right to pass through there without the owner's permission, but the short cut eliminated a long and roundabout bit of the road to La Presa. Then, as a final explanation, he added:

"Besides, Don Carlos lets everyone ride through. . . ."

"Everyone but you," was the aggressive reply. "If ever I find you again on my land, you'll get one of these bullets."

This reply put an end to the *gaucho's* assumed meekness. He looked contemptuously at Rojas, and said with slow distinctness:

"You are an old man, that's why you talk to me like that."

"And you are nothing but a cattle thief. . . . Why they should all be afraid of you is more than I can understand. But if ever again you steal one of my steers, old man as I am, I'll make you pay for it!"

As the rancher was still pointing his revolver at him, and as the expression of his face allowed no doubt whatever concerning his determination to carry out his threats, the *gaucho* did not dare move a hand toward his belt. The slightest motion on his part might call forth a shot. . . . So he contented himself with giving Don Carlos a venomous glance, and saying very low:

"We'll meet again, boss, and we'll have more time to talk."



With this he dug his spurs into his horse and set off at a gallop, without looking back, while Don Carlos remained holding his revolver in his right hand.

Near the river, however, the *gaucho* had a more agreeable encounter. He noticed three riders coming towards him, and stopped to see who they might be.

The Marquésa had felt impelled to accept an invitation to go once more to the works to see the progress of the dam. Things were now at such a pass between Pirovani and the French engineer that she had felt it necessary to her own peace to soothe the latter by accepting his suggestion that she ride out with him. For his part, he felt that he must show her once again that he was, after all, the directing spirit of the enterprise, and that the contractor, on that ground at least, had to submit himself very often to his commands.

While they were on these excursions, the captain could talk much more freely to Elena than at her house. The fact that the Marqués was busy with the work of planning the canal system aroused all sorts of hopes and illusions in the captain's breast. If only the Marquésa would consent to ride with him, alone, along the river bank. . . .

But, as though she had divined his thoughts, she insisted that Moreno go with them. Only on that condition would she consent. . . .

"Because you see, you're dangerous, Señor Canterac," said Elena, pretending to be afraid, and at the same time laughing at her pretended fear.

"I'll go with you only if this friend of ours, who is the father of a family, and a thoroughly serious sort of person, goes along with us."

Moreno, pleased at having been included, but at the same time somewhat vexed at being described in such terms, rode along behind Elena, who paid not the slightest attention to him. She remembered him only when Canterac



became too vehement in his attentions, riding close to her horse and grasping her hand, or attempting other more or less daring gallantries.

"Moreno," she would manage to say, while the captain was manœuvring for place, "ride forward and stay on my left. . . . I don't want the captain so near . . . I don't like military men, anyway! They're too bold!"

All three stopped their attempts at conversation to look intently at Manos Duras, who was waiting motionless at the side of the road. Moreno knew who he was and murmured his name to Elena, whose interest in the *gaucho* was so keen that she yielded to her impulse to speak to him.

"So you are the famous Manos Duras of whom we have heard so often?"

The horseman seemed a little disturbed by Elena's words, and more so by her smile. He took off his sombrero with a reverential gesture, "as though he were in front of a miracle-working picture," thought Moreno. Then, in a theatrical manner that was with him quite spontaneous, he replied:

"I am that unhappy man, señora, and this present moment is the happiest in my life."

He looked at her with eyes in which she could plainly read a strange mixture of worship and desire; and she smiled with pleasure at the barbaric homage she was receiving.

Canterac, who thought the conversation ridiculous, indicated his impatience by teasing his horse and protesting every few moments that they ought to be getting on. But Elena did not choose to hear him, and, with smiling interest, continued her conversation with the *gaucho*.

"They tell dreadful stories about you. . . . Are they true? How many murders have you really committed?"

"Black calumnies, señora!" Manos Duras replied, looking straight into her eyes. "But, if there are any murders I can commit for you, you have only to ask!"



Elena seemed thoroughly pleased by this reply, and said with a look at Canterac :

“ How gallant the man is, in his way ! You can't deny that such offers as these are pleasant to hear. . . . ”

But the engineer for some reason seemed more and more irritated by the familiarity of this conversation between Elena and the cattle-rustler. Repeatedly he tried to nose his horse between the mounts of the other two, so as to put an end to the dialogue, but each time, with a gesture of impatience, Elena checked him.

Seeing that she was bent on continuing her conversation with Manos Duras, he turned to Moreno. He had to express his anger to some one.

“ This fellow is too presumptuous ! We'll have to give him a lesson ! ”

The Government employee accepted without reservation the allusion to the *gaucho's* presumption, but he merely shrugged at the suggestion of giving him a lesson. What could *they* do to this terrible bandit, if even the *comisario* had to show him a certain respect ?

“ You ought at least to stop them from buying his meat at the settlement. Boycott him, that's part of the answer ! ”

Moreno nodded with alacrity. The suggestion was easy enough to carry out, if that was all that he would be asked to do. . . .

Finally Elena moved on, bidding farewell to the *gaucho* with a coquetry excited by his emotion and the wolfish desire she saw in his eyes. . . .

“ Poor fellow ! How interesting to meet him like this. ”

And while the three riders went on, Manos Duras still remained motionless by the road. He wanted to look a while longer at that woman. A grave, thoughtful expression had come over his face as though he had a presentiment that this meeting, in some way or other, was to affect his life. But when Elena and her companions passed behind a



hillock of sand and disappeared from his range of vision, the *gaucho* no longer felt the dazzling stimulation of her presence. He smiled cynically to himself while pictures of barbaric lubricity passed through his mind, driving out his doubts and restoring to him his accustomed boldness.

"And why not?" he said to himself. "This is a woman, like those that dance at the *boliche* . . . aren't they all the same?"

Elena and her escorts went on along the river bank. Suddenly Elena straightened up in her saddle so as to be able to see farther into the distance.

In a meadow edged on the river side with young willows, were two horses, saddled but not hitched. A man and a boy stood at the far end of the meadow practising throwing the rope. The lariat they were using seemed to be a light one, less rapid in the air than the lassos of woven leather that the native cow-punchers used.

More by instinct than by strength of sight, Elena recognised the boy. Undoubtedly, that was Flor de Rio Negro teaching Watson to throw the rope, and laughing at the *gringo's* clumsy attempts to master the whirling, snake-like coils. Richard, too, now that Torre Bianca went daily to direct the canal work, was enjoying more liberty, and was using it to follow the Rojas girl about in her rides and share in her childish games.

Indicating to her companions that they were not to follow her, Elena rode towards the meadow.

Celinda, however, was quicker to notice her than was Watson. With a sudden right-about, she turned her back on the intruder, and at the same time ordered Watson to fix one of her spurs, which, so she said, had come loose.

The youth, after kneeling at her feet for a moment, found the spur quite firmly in place, and was about to get up. But she was determined to keep him on his knees.



"I tell you, *gringuito*, that I'm going to lose it! Please fasten it better!"

And it was only when she saw that Elena, offended, and well aware of the girl's hostility and stratagem, had turned her horse about and was riding away, that she allowed him to get up.

A little before sunset, Elena's party rode up the main street of the town. In front of Pirovani's house, which she now looked upon as hers, Elena dismounted, leaning on Moreno, who, as she stepped to the ground, had anticipated the captain's move to help her.

Offended, the Frenchman saluted with military abruptness, and rode away without waiting until Elena had gone into the house. Another day spoiled! He was furious with the others, and with himself.

Pirovani appeared, issuing from a side-street. As soon as the contractor caught sight of Moreno, who was going toward his house, he ran after him, eager to hear about the episodes of an excursion to which he had not been invited. With the easy credulity of the jealous, he believed that Canterac must have won a great advance on him during that short ride with the Marquésa.

With childish satisfaction he smiled when the Government employee told him how, several times, the Señora Marquésa had asked him to help her to keep the Frenchman at a proper distance.

"Of course, I know that she can't stand him," said the Italian. "I'm not so stupid that I can't see that! But, as he's the engineer in charge of the works, and can do favours for Robledo and her husband, she doesn't dare tell him what she thinks of him. . . ."

But his delight took a sharp fall when Moreno went on to tell him of the encounter with Manos Duras, and the "presumption" with which the fellow had talked with the "Señora Marquésa."



This was too much for the contractor !

“ All these people think they are everybody’s equal just because we are all together in this desert,” he exclaimed, scandalised. “ Some fine day this cattle thief will take it into his head to come to the Marquésa’s parties, just as though he were one of us. . . . It’s outrageous ! ”

“ By the way,” said Moreno, “ the captain doesn’t want any more meat to be bought of Manos Duras, nor any business done with him whatever. That’s more in your hands than in Canterac’s.”

Pirovani agreed with vehement signs of assent.

“ And I’ll see to it ! That Frenchman has the right idea for once. This is the first time in weeks that he’s said anything I could see any sense in ! ”



## CHAPTER X

A FEW months after the work in the camp up at the dam had been begun, the inhabitants of the various settlements along the Rio Negro began to talk admiringly of the Galician's new "store," which had suddenly become the most handsome establishment of the kind in the whole extent of the territory ; its contents were as novel and instructive as they were interesting.

One of the first foreigners to arrive at the camp in search of work was an Englishman who for many years had been wandering from one end of South America to the other. The last place he had stopped at in his adventurous career had been in the heart of Paraguay, where he had traded with the savage tribes of the region. However, this traffic had not, it seemed, made him rich. As a souvenir of his life in the forest, he had taken to Buenos Aires four crocodiles from the great Paraguay river. The natives had stuffed the hard hides of these *yacarés* with straw, and had performed the same operation on a boa constrictor several yards long which the Englishman added to his collection.

While at the capital, the wanderer heard of the great engineering work going on up at Rio Negro. There seemed a good chance of getting something to do there, so with all his stuffed animals he betook himself thither.

Within a few weeks, as a result of the sudden change from the torrid temperature of Paraguay to the harsh winter of Patagonia, and also of the fact that the Galician had given him far too ample credit at his store, the Englishman died of pneumonia complicated by *delirium tremens*. The worthy proprietor of the "Galician's Retreat," believing firmly in the sacred right of collecting money due him, and



animated, moreover, by a sure instinct in decorative matters, in so far at least as his customers' tastes were concerned, appropriated the four *yacarés* and the boa, and strung them up on the ceiling of his *boliche*.

As a matter of fact, Antonio Gonzales, who was an Andalusian, although, according to well established South American custom, no one thought of referring to him as anything but "*el gallego*," could never look up at the enormous reptile dangling like a ship's cable from his ceiling, forming curves and loops as it swung from beam to beam, without feeling a good deal of the Andalusian's hereditary horror of reptiles.

But it pleased the more important patrons of the establishment to drink their liquor under this extraordinary ceiling decoration, and a business man must, of course, always sacrifice his own preferences when they clash with those of the public.

The deeply-furrowed hide, so thickly covered with flies that they made a sheath over it, stretched diagonally across the ceiling, and each time the door opened and a stream of air poured in, swayed as though coming to life. The draught frequently shook off into the glasses of the customers some of the dead flies whose remains had been drying since the preceding season, or scales from the giant boa, or a fine powder that was a mixture of dry particles from the straw with which it was stuffed and the arsenic used to dry the skin. In the corners of the room were suspended the four crocodiles, black and with horny squares in their backs, revealing to the Galician's customers nothing but the bright yellow of their bellies and the soles of their paws.

Whoever came near the *boliche* always stepped in to have a glass of something, and to admire these curiosities. As to reptiles, there was not in the whole of Patagonia anything more remarkable than a certain deadly little viper, short, wide-headed and fat, and looking much like a comma; so



these imported monsters attained immediate and far-reaching celebrity.

The proprietor of the store, with the air of one who has seen a great deal of the world, would explain to the *gauchos* the customs of the animals balancing above their heads; he even went so far as to give his hearers to understand that he had had something to do with the perilous business of hunting them.

After a while, however, he observed that these ornaments, which were the pride of his establishment, did not attract everybody to his inn. On the contrary, if they attracted some they kept others away; for there were other Andalusians in the community beside the "Galician," and they had not the same interest as he in conquering their aversion from serpents. And besides these there were Italians and others who, although they were quite ready to praise the quality of the drink to be obtained at the store, did not dare step inside. It was all well enough to toss off a drink under the yellow paunch and the four extended claws of the crocodiles—they could go that—but, to see that serpent breathing out flies, and showing, as it moved, the hair-raising marks on its back whenever, on lifting your glass, you looked up at the ceiling—no—that was going too far!

The boldest of these spirits ventured to come in only after tightly clenching their right fists; then they advanced holding out the thumb and little finger so as to form horns to conjure away ill-luck. "Lizard! *Lagarto!*" they muttered, turning their eyes so as not to see what was above their heads. But there were others who, even with this protection, did not venture to come in, but stayed outside even in mid-winter, their hands in their belts, puffing out streams of vapour from their mouths, and calling loudly to Friterini, the Galician's servant, to bring their drinks to them.



So once more the proprietor sacrificed his convenience to that of his patrons. The boa was unhooked and sold to a tavern in that district of the port of Buenos Aires known as La Boca, where most of the customers were sailors and men from ships. So the four crocodiles remained as the sole ornaments, swaying from the ceiling like extinguished funeral lamps.

Another embellishment of the place was the collection of flags which on feast days fluttered from the roof, and the rest of the year adorned the *boliche's* one room. All the coloured rags ever chosen by men eager to make themselves a group apart, distancing other men in their pursuit of distinction, were to be found in this fly-infested shack in Patagonia ; flags of nations not in existence, of nations which had died and desired to live again, of nations which had never lived at all, and were struggling to be born.

There was not a workman in this " land of all the world " who could not find some bit of rag with his national colours at the Galician's. Antonio Gonzales had, long before they were known in the embassies of Europe, become familiar with flags which years later were to be consecrated by the events of the Great War. And he had room for them all ; the flag of the Irish nation was there as well as that of the Zionist Republic, later to be established in Jerusalem. Only once had he raised any objections in the matter, and that was when some of his compatriots from Barcelona tried to get him to put up the Catalan emblem.

" I admit this flag to membership here," he said with a majestic wave of the hand towards the walls already bristling with banners. " The only condition I make is concerning its size." He quite firmly required that it should not exceed a fourth part of the Spanish emblem.

On national holidays, aided by Friterini, he always adorned his roof with the banners of his collection, offering



explanations as he did so to the *comisario*, the only representative of authority in the settlement. One might have thought him the keeper of the royal seal consulting with the prime minister.

"Don Roque, you know many things, but in this matter of banners, I know the oxen I am ploughing with better than you do. The first point to consider is this. The Argentine flag must be placed higher than any of the others. Then, to the right of it, the Spanish flag. No other can have that place. In this country we come next to the Argentinians, as you know . . . Isabel, *la catolica*. . . . Solis . . . Don Pedro de Mendoza . . . Don Juan de Garay. . . ."

He produced these names of navigators and explorers without the slightest consideration for chronology, while, from below, he watched his Italian waiter placing the flags on the roof. Argentina was all right? Spain beside her? No danger of their tumbling down with the wind? Well, then, Friterini could finish up the job to his taste.

"Aren't we all equal in this everybody's land?" inquired the tavern-keeper.

In the summertime the flies invaded the somewhat murky interior of the *boliche* in unbelievable multitudes, frantically seeking refuge from the consuming heat of a land for ever thirsting. At night the reddish glow of the lamps kept clouds of the pests in a state of aggressive wakefulness. Slow, tenacious, lazily obstinate, they fell into the food, swam about in the gravy and tumbled drunkenly into the glasses. If one chanced to open one's mouth, at once there were some flies in it; they buzzed in one's ears and plunged into one's nostrils. Each spoonful of food in the short trip from plate to mouth was beset by these intruders who alighted on it with tenacious feet and cautiously outstretched wings.



Some of them, of course, were slaughtered. But there were so many of them, so discouragingly many, that finally all attempts to destroy them were abandoned out of sheer weariness. One learned finally to blow them patiently out of the way, or quietly spit them out when they strayed into one's mouth.

There were other parasites, too, equally obstinate in their assaults upon the dwellings of this little town lost in an immense solitude. As the numbers of human beings were greater per square foot in the *boliche*, the number of these pests was greater there too. From the roof and the walls, blood-sucking insects descended on the rough skins of the clients, perforating them and swelling like balloons with the blood they drew from them. And there were others that crept up from the ground, clinging to the heavy boots of the customers and slyly making their way towards the flesh that they scented. In wintertime, when the doors of the *boliche* were closed, the air grew thick with tobacco smoke, and smelt of gin, sour wine, wet clothing, and shoe leather. The establishment, meanwhile, was run with an equal disregard for the convenience or even the comfort of its patrons, and for economy. There were scarcely any chairs in the place. The guitar-players had, it is true, horse-skulls to sit on ; but the majority of their audience squatted on the ground when they were tired ; yet, on the shelves behind the counter, impressive stores of champagne bottles were renewed every week.

When the day labourers received their fortnight's pay, the Galician had to minister to the most grotesque orgies. The workmen who had no families and who could spend all their money for their own pleasure, devised banquets of Babylonian extravagance, recklessly ordering innumerable tins of Spanish sardines, and nearly as many bottles of Poméry Greno tū wash these tit-bits down. There were times at La Presa when not a mouthful of bread was to be



procured, but the customers of the Galician's, obliged to live on hard fare though they were, knew the taste of *pâté de foie gras*, and how much a bottle of Moët and Chandon cost. On the evenings between pay-days, gin and whisky soothed the silent thirst of this or that patron, or gave another the stimulus he needed to go on talking.

The inexhaustible theme of conversation was the question as to when the trains would begin making regular stops at La Presa, instead of simply stopping at the dam when there was machinery to be unloaded there for the construction work.

To the inhabitants of the settlement it seemed a gross injustice that the trains should make no stop before Fuerte Sarmiento, under pretext that the engineering work in the river was not yet completed, nor the adjacent lands irrigated, and that consequently there could be no question of colonising there.

In the old world the towns came first; then railroads were built for them. In this new land it was the reverse. First the rails had been laid across the desert and at every fifty miles a station was built, around which a town sprang up.

"Why shouldn't we have a station in La Presa? Aren't there more than a thousand souls in this settlement?" Gonzalez, the liberal patriot, was indignantly inquiring. "Everyone knows that the train stops for mail at lots of places where there is nothing but a horse tied to a hitching post. What we need is some one to represent us at Buenos Aires."

But, in the interval, the *gallego's* patrons were content with making guesses as to the date when the train would begin to stop at the dam settlement, putting up cases of champagne bottles as bets on the event's taking place in one month or another.

Here and there chatted groups of those who were not



interested in dancing, or in the women who were assembled in the *boliche* on much the same footing as the champagne and gin bottles and equally purchasable.

The trench-diggers were giving voice to their opinion of the *alpataco*, that hateful bush that rises but a short distance above the ground, but that sends its iron roots that defy and even shatter axes down into the ground for a distance of thirty feet. To dig out one of these bushes keeps several men busy all day, with the result that whenever the labourers come upon one the air quivers and becomes blue with exclamations and profanity.

Friterini a pale youth, with hair brushed boldly back from his forehead, burning black eyes, and bare arms, rushed off as soon as he had served the clients, to join some Spanish workmen at a small table, and to describe to them in the mongrel Italian soon acquired by those sons of Italy who come to Spanish-speaking countries, the beauty of his native city.

Brescia ! Ah, Brescia was something far different from this blazing desert, this sand heap, and well of thirst ! Not that it was a big city, no, that wasn't the point, but it was beautiful, and all the youths took their mandolins with them when they went out to make love, and there were girls one could love there too. . . . Ah, Brescia !

The *gallego*, leaning over his counter, was lending an attentive ear to his older customers, the *jinetes* or riders of the country, those who had covered every foot of it from the Andes to the Atlantic, from the Colorado to the Strait of Magellan, accompanying sometimes cattle purchasers, at other times exploring parties, sometimes prospecting for water and pasture lands. Their patience defied time ; for them the weeks and months of their journeys were no more than so many days.

One of them liked to tell of his last trip, an exploration of lovely lakes hidden between spurs of the Andes. He



had gone on this expedition as a guide or *baquiano* for a European scholar to whom he had been recommended by another scholar guided by him in the same fashion some twenty years earlier. It was during the first expedition that the remains of huge animals of prehistoric epochs had been found, gigantic skeletons that were then and there labelled and boxed up to be put together again later in the museums of the old world.

The second trip had been even more unusual ; the scholar who undertook it was also looking for prehistoric animals, but he expected to find them alive ; for among the scarce inhabitants of the mountain chain a conviction was passed on from generation to generation that there still existed in the Patagonian desert enormous creatures and fantastic forms, the last remains of a fauna that had arisen during the first eras of life on our planet.

There were even some who were certain that they had seen, from a great distance, it is true, the gigantic pleiosaurus plunging into the death-quiet waters of the Andean lakes or feeding on the vegetation along their banks. However, it was always towards dusk when the mountain range spread its purple shadows over the plain that these creatures appeared. There were always, of course, sceptics to affirm that such sights as these appeared only to those who, as they returned from some distant *boliche*, carried in their bellies a good supply of liquor.

The old *baquiano* did not commit himself as to the substantiality of the beasts in question. There were arguments on both sides of the question. . . .

“ In a whole year we never found one of those animals, and we scoured all the territory from lake to lake and from Nahuel-Huapi to near Magellan. But with my own eyes I have seen tracks in the ground, larger than elephant hoofs . . . and the people living around those places saw them too. And once, near one of the most distant lakes,



I found heaps of dry dung so large that they could not have been those of any known animal. My scholar gentleman didn't answer when I asked him what he thought of these signs . . . you could see he was wondering where the beast's lair might be . . . and who knows? We might have found the beast himself if we had continued a little longer on that track. But perhaps, when there are more people in those parts, some one of these solitary beasts will be discovered at last."

The proprietor of the *boliche* liked best of all to ask these elderly customers of his to talk to him about certain mysterious personages who had passed through the region earlier just at the time when the Indians had been driven out, and colonies were being established. They were personages whose adventures sounded like the inventions of a novelist; they had more often than not been born in palaces; and, like many of the saints, they had abandoned the house of their fathers to endure every kind of privation, renouncing all the comforts that would naturally have been theirs by prerogative of riches and rank, renouncing even their very names, in order to be vagabonds, to know the harsh pleasure of savage liberty. . . . Juan Ort, for instance, whose name was a familiar one to all the old inhabitants of the territory. . . .

The *gallego* knew this story, however, from having read it in books and newspapers. Juan Ort was that Archduke of Austria who, a victim of the poetic melancholy hereditary in his family, gave up his rank in the navy, and his position at court to sail the seas in a luxurious yacht on which was everything to delight the senses—rare and delicate foods, exquisite music, beautiful women.

One day, the news came that his yacht with its entire crew had been lost off Cape Horn. But Juan Ort had not perished. This shipwreck, real or feigned, was going to serve his purposes, allowing him to descend lower in the social



scale, to live with those who were struggling in life's lowest depths.

"I knew him," muttered one of the other old inhabitants of La Presa. "And he was nothing more, and nothing less, than either you or I. He was a man just like any other who comes along with his pack on his back looking for work. But this *gringo* was a tall, red-bearded man, glum-like and fond of drinking alone. He didn't say he was Juan Ort. He didn't have to. We knew it. Besides, he carried in his bag a little silver cup with the shield of the royal family on it, and he liked to drink from it when he was on his bit of a ranch. It was the cup he drank from when he was going to school, he said."

But one day this romantic vagabond disappeared. Some supposed him in hiding in the dives of Buenos Aires, others asserted that they had met him playing the part of a strolling photographer in Paysandu. No one knew where he had died.

"*Macanas!*" exclaimed the sceptics when such tales were told, "all the *gringos* who come around here and who don't want to work make out that they're Juan Orts so that fools will gape at them."

But Gonzales, insatiable reader of many-volumed novels that he was, believed in Juan Ort and in other equally interesting characters who came to end their days in a land where no one was ever asked to tell what his past had been. Just so long as his customers didn't try to sneak out without paying their bills, the *bolichero* was inclined to attribute an interesting past to all of them, and look upon them all as possible sons or nephews of an emperor, restless noblemen dissatisfied with their origin and eager to change their manner of life.

Others of the members of the *tertulia*, those of more prosperous aspect, were preoccupied with the future of this incipient city. Its destiny was closely bound up with that



of Gonzalez, who went about with his hairy chest bared to the sky, his hair uncombed, his face streaked with dust and sweat, and elastic bands supporting his shirt sleeves, so that his hands might be free. Unquestionably, the servant presented a better appearance than the master. But the *gallego* had several thousand *pesos* saved up in the Banco Español de Bahía Blanca ; moreover, he owned a thousand acres of land near the town. The only thing in the world that troubled him was the wretched ignorance and lack of manners of his patrons, who persisted in calling his place "*boliche*" as in the first days of its existence, without seeming to appreciate the important improvements accomplished by its proprietor, nor to understand the sign saying "*Almacén*" which occupied such an important position above the door.

But what was his prosperity actually worth compared with the millions of *pesos* that were going to fall into La Presa some day, when, from a mere workman's camp, it would change into an important town and its "*almacén*" would become a handsome establishment like those in Buenos Aires, and the dusty lands that he had bought in small lots scattered through all the fields that were to be irrigated, would be purchased from him for substantial sums by Spanish and Italian colonists ? Then he would return to his native land to set himself up in Madrid, going about in its streets and drives in the most luxurious and largest automobile to be found ; and the people at home, pleased with the presents he would bring them, would perhaps make him deputy or senator, and then one of the cabinet ministers would present him to the King of Spain, whose portrait, in colours, was nailed to the wooden part of one of the partitions of his *boliche* directly under one of the crocodiles. Why, who knows ? They might even make him a viscount, or a *marqués*, like so many other *bolicheros* who had grown rich in America ! But he cut these ambitious dreams short



to return to the reality in which he was still living. With the patrons who were interested in the irrigation of this region, he was describing its present aspect in order to provide a more startling contrast for its future prosperity.

"What is there here now besides the folks living at the dam? Ostriches maybe, and a puma . . . not a single thing else."

His hearers laughed at the memory of the bands of ostriches who made excursions now and then from the plateau to the river basin, astonished, no doubt, by the novelty of the works that were being constructed along the water's edge. The *Señorita* from the Rojas ranch, for instance, always had a good time pursuing these flocks that moved about on stilts, and that always managed to escape by opening wide their compass-like legs; though now and then one of them was overtaken by the young lady's swift lasso.

And, when he was gripped by hunger, the puma too came down from the uplands to prowl about the houses and ranches of La Presa.

When the puma was mentioned there were several smiles and glances in Friterini's direction. It was not yet forgotten that one dawn, as the waiter was on his way to the corral from the *boliche*, he had seen a kind of tiger jump from the bottom of an empty barrel; yes, there were spots on its skin, and it was about the size of a dog. The puma, who had evidently selected this place as a safe lodging for the night and had curled himself up to sleep, had given the homesick young Brescian, with his mind full of serenades, a fearful scare.

"When we have water, and the land is irrigated," Gonzalez continued, "there will be thousands and thousands of families here."

Both he and his customers spoke in a tone that was almost lyric, of the marvels of irrigation. Beyond La Presa was Fuerte Sarmiento, the nearest railway station. The town



there had grown up around a fort at the time when the Indians were driven out. The troops of the occupation had without much difficulty opened up a small canal, taking advantage of the grade of the river, and this watercourse had made the place a veritable oasis in the midst of the dry adjacent lands. Great poplars formed walls of defence around the orchards ; vines, all kinds of garden products, and fruit trees grew with the prodigality due to a vigorous soil that after resting thousands of years begins once more to give birth to the multitudes of living things that it is able to conceive and nourish. And all the more striking were these rich harvests because of the contrast they offered to the desert that began at once beyond the reach of the tentacles of the canal.

But the majority of the drinkers were even more enthusiastic about another oasis in that arid region. This one was a good many miles below the dam at a point where there was a natural declivity in the river bed ; it had been very easy to run irrigation ditches out from the lower level of the stream.

It was a Basque colonist who had opened up some canals and irrigated the several hundred acres on which he had sown alfalfa. What a fine fodder that was ! The patrons of the *boliche* always began to talk excitedly whenever the subject of this crop came up. No, really, irrigated alfalfa was nothing short of miraculous. In the whole territory of Rio Negro this plant, of Asiatic origin, needed to be sown but once. If the alfalfa fields had water, they would sow themselves. Why, in Fuerte Sarmiento there were alfalfa lands that dated as far back as the expulsion of the Indians, and now, after thirty odd years of productivity, they were more fertile than the day when they were first sown. The greater the number of crops taken off, the stronger and more luxuriant were the alfalfa plants that sprang up in their place.

“ If only we could eat alfalfa,” the *gallego* remarked



gravely, "the social problem would be solved, for there would then be food enough in the world for everybody."

But, unfortunately, only live stock could assimilate this remarkable fodder. The sheep that the Basque kept in his alfalfa fields were like animals from another planet where miraculous fodder might give the creatures feeding on it proportions that to our terrestrial eyes would seem fantastically exaggerated.

"They look like creatures seen through a magnifying glass," said the proprietor of the *boliche*.

The Basque fellow, proud of his endless pasture lands and his huge sheep, liked to say when some poor tramp passed through his ranch.

"I'll give you that sheep if you can carry it!"

And then the poor devil would nearly split his sides open trying to carry the heavy beast. . . . When the rich alfalfa grower had guests, he would order a turkey to be put on the spit. And the guests would be overcome with amazement when they saw the enormous alfalfa-fattened bird brought to the table. They always thought it must be a sheep roasted whole.

The Basque's prosperity made it possible for him to be generous toward the poverty of others, and even indulgent to theft; but he could not tolerate Manos Duras and other cattle thieves, because they took live animals from him.

"Let them take all the meat they want," he used to say. "I know what it is to be poor, and I know what it is to be hungry. But at least, *pucha!* let them leave me the skins. . . ."

More than once, as he rode around through his enormous estate, he broke into curses at sight of the entrails and the remains of a sheep left near the ditches. But if, a few paces from the scene of the slaughter, he came upon the hide still quite fresh spread out on the wire fence, he would smile and mutter:



"That's all right. Just so long as they're decent and only take what they need to satisfy their hunger. . . ."

Meanwhile, the *boliche* owner was dreaming of some day being as rich as his compatriot. He, too, would own immense alfalfa fields. . . . And, talking interminably of this fodder with the other men there who also owned barren tracts of hard-baked soil, and were also awaiting the transformation to be wrought by irrigation, he never noticed the length of the night hours; for, like a child listening to a marvellous tale, he expressed the same emotions in the same words without ever tiring.

"If the day would only come when we shall see our fields all red and covered with water as though we were going to make bricks. . . ."

The thought of it was sheer ecstasy. . . . Then they would look at the clock. It was late! They had to go to bed, for they must be up at dawn. Instinctively, as they left the *boliche*, they all turned their eyes toward the dark river that silently, for thousands of miles, slipped through the arid lands without once bestowing on them the gentle caress of its touch, a caress that would have brought forth so many wonders.

But, while waiting for the moment when he would wake up to find himself a millionaire, Antonio Gonzalez decided that one of the best ways of turning an honest penny was to arrange Sunday horse races. For this enterprise he needed Don Roque's permission; and it was not so easy to get it.

The *comisario* was afraid of his superiors in office; and the Federal Government had forbidden horse-racing in the territories where the conditions of life were too primitive to allow orderly management of this diversion. It always resulted in drunken orgies and innumerable fist-fights, or worse. But this former city-dweller needed greater resources than his Government pay in order to bear his sojourn



in Patagonia with resignation ; for which reason Antonio Gonzalez could always persuade him, after a little private conversation, to overcome his scruples in the matter.

" But, for Heaven's sake, *gallego*, don't advertise your horse race too widely ! " the *comisario* implored. " Don't make such a noise about it that they'll hear up in Buenos Aires about what's going on . . . because we'll get into trouble. Have it up at the dam if you like . . . but for the people who are here only . . . no one from outside ! "

But to be a success the undertaking must be given wide publicity ! As early as the Saturday before the great event, riders began coming in from all parts of the territory.

After all, there were none too many days of general merry-making in the region, and the races at La Presa were something that should be taken advantage of. The population at the settlement suddenly tripled, and within twenty-four hours a whole month's supply of liquor had been consumed at the *boliche*.

Manos Duras greeted the numerous riders who had come in from distant ranches ; many of them had, from time to time, been of use to him in his business transactions. On this occasion they all rode their best mounts, those they called "*fletes* " ; these were the horses they were going to ride in the races.

The prizes put up by the *gallego* did not amount to very much—a twenty *pesos* note, brightly-coloured handkerchiefs, a jar of gin ; but the *gauchos*, proud of their spurs, of their belts adorned with pierced silver coins, of their silver-handled knives, had come to win for the honour and glory of winning. They would go home satisfied with having shown their skill and grace as horsemen before the hordes of *gringo* workmen who were quite incapable of riding a broncho.

They did not often start for home when the races were over, but stayed to celebrate their triumph. This brought



it about that in the early hours of Sunday the *gallego* took in money by the fistful. It was these hours that were most dreaded by Don Roque and that made him vacillate about granting new permissions to Gonzalez, even though such refusals cost him the handsome sums that the tavern keeper was only too willing to pay him.

The crowds overflowed from the *boliche* and formed in groups around it. Friterini, aided by the women, went in and out among them with bottles and glasses. Guitars were twanging, accompanied by shouts and the clapping that meant there was dancing going on in the centre of the dense clusters of *gauchos* and workmen. The *comisario*, with his long-sabred soldiers, stood at a considerable distance, for he knew that his presence, or theirs at least, served more often than not to excite instead of pacifying the crowd.

It was the Chilians who worried him most. In ordinary celebrations, when they were with their compatriots, they grew drunk methodically without any violent changes of mood. Accustomed to a certain decorum in their social relations, they sang and danced the *cueca* without in any way disturbing the peace. Nevertheless, their aggressive patriotism increased in proportion to the quantity of liquor they absorbed.

"*Viva Chile!*" they shouted in chorus, in the intervals between *cuecas*.

Some more enthusiastic member of the crowd would complete the exclamation in due form, hurling it out in all its classical purity, in the fashion of the *rotos* when they are celebrating a national holiday, or leading a bayonet charge.

"*Viva Chile—!*"

But on the days of the horse races, the presence of strangers, especially those haughty desert riders, who were so proud of the horses they bestrode, of their saddles orna-



mented with silver work, and of their weapons, and the jingling metal ornaments of their attire, seemed to spread an aggressive uneasiness through the crowd, a mixture of hatred and envy, especially among those *Chilenos* who were unmounted.

Suddenly the purring of the guitars stopped, and a noise of quarrelling arose in the silence. Then some women shrieked, and above this sound came the animal yelp of a man mortally wounded. Silence—depths of silence. Then the crowd scattered, leaving a man with frantic eyes and a blood-soaked hand alone in the centre of the open space.

“ Make way, comrades ! Luck was against me. . . . ”

Silently they stood out of his way. No one attempted to stop him, not even the *comisario*, who was trying to get as far away from the scene of action as possible.

The crime might have been an attack against the laws established by older and wiser generations. The brother of the stricken man or of the dead thought of nothing for the time being than of getting the victim under ground. This was not the moment to attack the aggressor. There was time enough to go in search of the “ unlucky ” man, and find him, wherever he might be ; then he, the avenger, would take his turn of “ bad luck ” and kill his man. Murder called for vengeance in due form.

When one of these incidents occurred, Don Roque, in a state of great indignation, completely forgot the tavern-keeper’s generosity.

“ Didn’t I tell you that all this would come to a bad end ? Now we’ll hear from Buenos Aires . . . and before you know it I’ll lose my job ! ”

But Buenos Aires spoke no word, and Don Roque continued in the service. As he was the only representative of authority, and as he and his colleague at Fuerte Sarmiento were in perfect agreement about certain points of policy,



the dead man was properly buried when there was a dead man ; if he was no more than wounded, his gashes were allowed to heal ; and of course he always swore that he had never seen the man who attacked him, and that he couldn't recognise him if he were to meet him face to face.

Several months went by, however, and Don Roque was still not mollified.

"That's all very well, *gallego* ; but I don't want to have any more such doings. . . ."

Whereupon the *bolichero* redoubled in generosity and a horse race was announced for the following Sunday.

When this celebration came to a peaceful end, Gonzalez triumphed over the *comisario*.

"You see ! This town is getting civilized. You can trust it to be decent now. What happened before was just an accident."

Nevertheless, the tavern-keeper, by way of avoiding trouble, extended his generosity in the direction of Manos Duras, in the belief that he would be invaluable as a means of maintaining the peace, inasmuch as he inspired a wholesome fear in all those who were not his particular friends and subject for that reason to his bidding.

One Saturday, at nightfall, Robledo came down the main street on his way back from the irrigation works. As he rode by Pirovani's house he looked away and hurried his horse along, fearful lest Elena should open a window and to call him to stop. Several days had passed since he had last called on her. On that afternoon he felt the vague uneasiness that foretells the presence of danger without giving any clue as to what quarter to expect it from.

The settlement at the dam seemed to him entirely changed from what it had been two months earlier. It looked the same ; but the life of the community had been transformed in a disquieting and alarming way. The gentle monotony,



the rather coarse-grained self-confidence that had once distinguished it, the mutual trust felt by most of its inhabitants in one another, were fast disappearing.

The demon of the pampas, the terrible *Gualicho*, he who had been driven out with the native Indians from the lands which had once been theirs, seemed to have returned, and to be claiming his own, to be fighting for it tooth and nail. Half-amused, half-fearful, Robledo recalled the method employed by the Indians to uproot the spirit of evil when they noted his presence among them. When their cattle-thieving expeditions or their attempts to ambush neighbouring tribes failed, when sickness increased among their tents, when famine threatened, all the horsemen would arm themselves as for a pitched battle and gallop out into the fields to put the accursed *Gualicho* to flight. With their lances and *macanas* or battleaxes they fought with him, they hurled against him their *boleadoras*, formed of pieces of leather tied at the ends around two smooth stones, so as to wind tightly around the victim; and they accompanied their shots and gashes and blows with shrill howls, while the women and children, in procession, took part in this united offensive, adding their blows and imprecations to the general onslaught. Surely some one of these countless strokes of knife and dart must reach the evil spirit and make him flee for his life; and when at last the whole tribe fell to the ground exhausted, peace and quiet returned to them once more, for they were convinced that the enemy had betaken himself out of their camp.

And now Robledo the Spaniard thought he noticed the presence of *Gualicho*, the pampas demon, the malign one, the poisonous busybody. It was he who was stirring up these men, setting one against the other. How frequent hostile glances were amongst them now, as though when they looked they saw someone different from the friend they had known so long! Would it perhaps become neces-



sary for the whole community to join hands and put the enemy to flight with a combined offensive ?

He was debating this problem when suddenly his horse started and stopped so abruptly that Robledo almost took a header. At the same moment, he heard shots and saw the glass from one of the tavern windows and then from the door, splinter and fly through the air.

Through these openings came all manner of projectiles ; bottles, glasses, and even a horse skull. Then came some *gauchos*, friends of Manos Duras, who backed away from the tavern, firing revolvers at it. Several men from the camp plunged through the doorway ; they too were shooting ; and those of them who had no more cartridges advanced knife in hand.

A man fell and began to drag himself along through the dust. Then Robledo saw another man tumble over. Gonzalez appeared, in shirt sleeves as usual, with elastic bands showing his biceps. With arms upraised he proffered entreaties, commands and imprecations, in one breath. The half-breeds who served in the *boliche* also rushed out and added their shrieks to the confusion, while they fled up and down the street.

Robledo took out his revolver and spurring his horse got between both groups of contestants, pointing first to one group then to the other, and at the same time commanding the crowd to come to order. With the help of the neighbours, who began coming out of their houses, some of them carrying rifles, he succeeded in bringing about a momentary semblance of order. Followed by the workmen from the dam, the *gauchos* fled, while the women, both the dancers from the *boliche* and the respectable wives and mothers of the neighbourhood, ran to the assistance of the wounded.

Gonzalez, who was making a great deal of noise without anyone paying attention to him, made a gesture of delight



when he recognised Robledo, as though certain that the engineer would know just how to save the situation.

"These are the friends of Manos Duras," he explained. "They came to raise a row because down at the dam they won't let that dirty fellow sell them any more meat, or do any business with them. As there's a race coming off to-morrow, Manos Duras blew into town to make trouble for me and that's how all this happened. . . . It's as though the devil was let loose in the town now, Don Manuel! And there was a time when it was so quiet here. . . ."

Still hot and excited from the recent battle, the *gallego* went on sputtering explanations. He admitted that the Chilians sometimes provoked disturbances, but only occasionally and always as a consequence of too much liquor. No one could hold them responsible for this affair! Poor *rotos*! It was the natives who had behaved outrageously, as if carrying out secret orders, and provoked the workmen with a definite intention of stirring up a riot.

"And this kind of thing isn't going to stop here, Don Manuel. I know Manos Duras. If he had wanted money he would have come to me for it, and it wouldn't have been the first time. . . . But there's something else in all this that I don't quite get. He has some reason for making mischief, there's something in all this that we don't know. . . ."

The wounded had been picked up and put in the *boliche* by this time. A man on horseback started off for Fuerte Sarmiento to get the doctor, who came to La Presa only once every two weeks. Some of the women went off to find a Sicilian *peon* who was reputed to know the secret of curing wounds; and in the middle of the street the old grannies of the settlement were shrilling out their opinion of Manos Duras and his friends.

Robledo, deep in thought about all that had been going on, started off once more towards his house. Yes; Gonzalez was right. The devil had been let loose in La



Presa. Life there was completely changed from what it had been before. . . .

And on the following day he noticed a great transformation in the workmen at the dam. Those who belonged to Pirovani's gang sprawled on the ground smoking and dozing. Some of them, those of Spanish blood, were humming to themselves, clapping their hands and looking dreamily away, as though they saw in the distance the homeland they had left.

The Chilian foreman known as "the friar" was going from one group to another, protesting against this laziness; but all he got for his pains was laughter at his expense. One of the older workmen went so far as to answer insolently :

"What's the matter with you? Do you expect to get something from the wop feller when he dies? What is it to you whether we work or not? Say, cut that stuff! He hasn't been around here for days!"

Another labourer, with a suggestive laugh, broke out :

"He's following that pretty *gringa* around like a dog, you know, the one that's always perfumed to the king's taste and that they call the Marquésa. Well, I don't blame him. . . . I would too if there was any chance. . . ."

And he added something that made his hearers burst out into savage and bestial laughter. Suddenly a boy, one of the apprentices, who was keeping a look-out from a slight rise of ground, gave the alarm.

"Engineer coming!"

With a jump they picked up their tools and went to work, bending to the task as though they were all models of diligence, while Robledo walked his horse slowly through the groups.

But all the while they were pretending to work they kept an eye on the engineer, and no sooner was his back turned than they let their tools fall once more to the ground. Rob-



ledo turned several times to look back. And each time he did so he felt more and more convinced of *Gualicho's* presence in the colony. The demon was busying himself there, everyone was feeling the touch of his evil hand ; work itself was crumbling away in his presence. . . .

Leaving Pirovani's *peons* to their own devices, he came to that part of the works where his own men were digging canals.

Here something was being accomplished. Torre Bianca was directing the men and keeping close watch on every move, letting no effort go to waste, and lending an example by his own activity. As soon as he caught sight of Robledo, he led him away to a spot where they could talk unheard. From his manner Robledo guessed that he had unpleasant news to impart.

"The bad example set by those fellows at the dam is beginning to affect these men up here. They won't work any longer than the other labourers, they say. I can't make out what's got into poor old Pirovani. He seems to have given up his work entirely."

Robledo looked at him fixedly, but he kept silence while Torre Bianca went on with his news.

"Last night Moreno told me that Pirovani and Canterac are not getting on together. . . . Each one of them, in his capacity as engineer, refuses to approve of what the other does as contractor. They seem to want to give each other a black eye with the Government so as to hold up the pay. Pirovani says that he'll stop the whole works and go to Buenos Aires, where he has a lot of friends, and make complaints at headquarters there about the Frenchman. . . ."

This was more than Robledo could listen to in silence.

"And while they are squabbling," he raged, "they're losing precious time. Winter is coming ; that means that the river will rise, and if the dam isn't finished, it will be swept away and the work of years destroyed. The whole thing will have to be done over again. . . ."



The Marqués, who was plunged in thought, suddenly exclaimed :

“ But those men used to be friends ! Something must have come between them. . . .”

Robledo made a determined effort to keep his eyes from betraying pity and amazement, as he looked at his friend . He merely nodded.



## CHAPTER XI

IT was a little after sundown when Moreno hastily left his house ; Canterac had sent him an urgent message asking him to call. The Frenchman was pacing nervously up and down. He wore high boots and riding breeches ; his cartridge belt, revolver and coat were lying on a chair. Drops of water from his evening ablutions still trickled down his chest, and his shirt sleeves were rolled to above his elbows. His hard, dictatorial expression became harsher still when he drew his eyebrows together, as though some thought or other were causing him both anger and pain.

Moreno noticed that on all the pieces of furniture and in all the corners there were numerous packages carefully wrapped in tissue paper, tied with delicate ribbon, and sealed.

It was easy to guess that the engineer had slept badly, tormented, perhaps, by whatever it was that he wished to impart to Moreno.

The Government employee sat down and prepared to listen. Canterac remained so as to be free to walk up and down when his restlessness overcame him.

" This Pirovani fellow, for all his vulgarity, is always getting ahead of me . . . just because he is rich ! "

Canterac pointed to the packages.

" There are the perfumes we ordered from Buenos Aires. Perfectly useless purchase ! The Italian got his before I did."

Moreno made haste to exonerate himself. He had done



everything he could to get the order sent down in time. But the other order had in some mysterious way come sooner. Perhaps the Italian had sent a messenger to the capital for it. . . .

Canterac, in spite of his disappointment, didn't want to appear ill-natured. He accepted Moreno's excuses, and slapped him on the back in friendly fashion.

"I couldn't sleep a wink last night, my dear fellow. I have a scheme I want to consult you about. Something must be done to put this intriguing Italian who has the cheek to get in my way, back in his proper place. . . . All these people around here seem to think themselves our equals, as though all distinctions between them and us had been suppressed. Why, I shouldn't be surprised if that fellow, in spite of the fact that he takes his orders from me, thought himself my superior . . . just because he has money!"

Canterac smiled with a cruel gleam in his eyes, and went on :

"But I'll help him to get rid of some of it ! Up to the present, I've been willing to approve officially of his contract work. But I'm not going to any more, and he'll lose by it. He'll have to break his agreement and get out of here. . . ."

The engineer came close to Moreno and began speaking in a low tone as though afraid of being heard.

"I want to do something unique, something that this uneducated emigrant would never be able to think of. It just occurred to me last night. At first I thought it was a crazy idea, but after I'd spent a few hours thinking it over I decided it was something really original and worth doing . . . if it is only possible to carry it out. . . . Pirovani offered the Marquésa a house. . . . Well, I shall offer her a park . . . a park that I'll make here in the middle of this Patagonian desert . . . what do you think of my idea, Moreno ?"

The Government employee was listening with profound



interest and astonishment, but he didn't know what to reply. He needed further explanations, so Canterac continued :

" In this park I shall give a *fiesta*, a garden party in honour of the Marquésa. I shall even allow myself the pleasure of inviting this rich rustic, just by way of taking vengeance on him by making him squirm with envy. You, my dear fellow, are to direct everything. Here are full instructions. I wrote them out last night, when I found there was no use trying to sleep."

Moreno took the papers Canterac was handing over to him, but instead of reading them, looked curiously at the engineer, as though entertaining serious doubts of his sanity.

" I understand your astonishment. . . . Of course it will cost a lot ! But what of it ? You can spend all you want. I've just received several thousand *pesos* that I expected to remit to Paris. But I'd rather give the Marquésa a surprise, and my park will certainly be that. . . . And I can always earn more money. I have every confidence in the future."

Canterac spoke with entire good faith ; it was easy enough to hear in his tone the soaring optimism of the lover.

The next day was Sunday, and Watson, about mid-day, went to Pirovani's former home to see Torre Bianca. Something had come up in connection with the canal works that he wished to discuss with the Marqués, especially since Robledo was away, having gone up to Buenos Aires to get extended credit from the banks for his work, and to sell some of the property he owned in the central pampas.

The young man went up the outside stairway with a certain trepidation, keeping an anxious eye on the windows. He knocked cautiously as though he particularly desired not to be heard by the other inhabitants of the house, and smiled with relief when Sebastiana came to the door.

" The master is not at home; he went with Don Canterac



to Fuerte Sarmiento this morning. And how is Don Robledo ? ”

Like the other natives of this part of the continent, the half-breed prefixed “ Don ” to family and Christian names indiscriminately.

Watson was just leaving when the hangings of the reception room were pushed aside by a white hand at the base of which shone a jewelled wrist-watch. The hand was beckoning, and the next instant Elena herself appeared, urging Watson with words and smiles to come in. The young man felt too constrained by her presence to dare refuse, and he followed his hostess into the drawing-room, where he sat with lowered eyes in embarrassed silence.

“ At last the pleasure of seeing you in my house,” she exclaimed. “ You must really consider me a very disagreeable sort of person ; you care so little about seeing me ! ”

Richard Watson proffered excuses. He had come there twice before with Robledo. It was impossible for him to come every evening like the others. He got up earlier than they did. As he was the junior partner, naturally he took on some of the more unpleasant responsibilities, such as getting to the works in good time to see that everything started off properly in the morning. . . .

But Elena was not interested in these explanations which were merely obstructing the conversation. There was something she wanted to say, that she must say at once.

“ Perhaps people have spoken ill of me to you. Why deny it ? It isn’t strange that it should be so. Women are always exposed to that sort of thing. Whenever we resist certain advances we run the risk of making an enemy ! ”

Elena’s tone was one of gentle ingenuousness as she gave voice to these complaints. One might have thought her the victim of the most unjust persecution. With a motion that brought her close to Richard she addressed



him without any semblance of reserve, as though they were tried comrades. The youth, meanwhile, began to be uneasily aware of the fragrance and close proximity of this beautiful woman.

"I am so unfortunate, Watson," she was saying. "I wanted the opportunity to talk to you about this, and I am so glad I can talk to you now for a moment alone . . . for probably this will never happen again. You see me surrounded by men who pay court to me, and I suppose you think I flirt with them. But do you know why? To make myself dizzy and numb, so as not to be so painfully conscious of the emptiness of my life. For years I have felt that I was alone . . . as though there were no other human being in the world except myself!"

Watson had forgotten his uneasiness of a few moments ago. Listening to her now with credulous interest, he accepted all that she said.

"But . . . your husband . . . ?"

There was an ironic gleam in her eyes as he put this innocent question. But she restrained her cynicism and replied, sadly :

"Oh, why talk of him? He is a very good man, but he is not the husband a woman such as I should have. . . . He has never understood me. Don't you see that he is weak, that he can never conquer in the battle of life? And I was born for greater things . . . yet here I am, an exile in this barbarous land, and through his fault!"

With a glow in her eyes that might have come from intense feeling, she looked at the young American, who lowered his eyes not knowing what to say; then she added thoughtfully :

"Can't you believe that a man who was young and energetic might have gone very far with a woman such as I to inspire him?"

Surprised, young Watson glanced up at her; then he



lowered his eyes again to her feet as though afraid to look at her. Elena smiled to herself. . . . Then she murmured softly :

“ But life is always like that ! The men we don’t want pursue us, and those who really arouse our interest always try to escape us ! ”

At these words the young man raised his eyes and looked at his hostess without the slightest suggestion of timidity but with a questioning expression. What did she mean? . . . . He did not know life at first hand ; and, being a man of action, he cared very little for reading, and had never, from books, caught glimpses of what life was really like. But he kept deep in his memory the observations made in certain rather simple and ingenuous novels of abundant adventure, that he had read on railway journeys and sea voyages, by way of escaping tedium. Besides this, he had seen a hundred or more “ movie ” stories, so that, in films as well as in the pages of the novels he had read, he had become familiar with the “ fatal charmer ” type of woman, the “ vamp,” the creature who is beautiful in body and of a malicious and trouble-making soul, tempting men to leave the ways of honour, troubling the domestic and gently monotonous happiness which every young man should seek in marriage and family life. Was the Marquésa perhaps one of these “ vamps ” ? . . . Robledo certainly didn’t seem to have much use for her. . . .

But he did not stop there. He went on to think of all the beautiful women who are calumniated and persecuted—also in the “ movies ”—and who, because of the envy they inspire, are forced to go through sufferings which had more than once brought tears to his eyes as he watched the film roll on. Yes, there must be victims such as these in the real world too . . . why else should there be so many of them on the screen ?

He was looking searchingly at Elena, trying to discover



which category she belonged to, the "fatal charmers" or "the persecuted victims of malice and envy"; but she meanwhile lowered her eyes, and said gently :

"It hurt me very much to see that you avoided me. Surrounded as I am by selfish and frightfully materialistic men, I need a friendship that is pure and disinterested. I want a companion who will appreciate me for my real self, my soul, and not for whatever physical charms I may possess !"

Richard Watson nodded involuntarily. How could he help approving such words ? . . . And as she went on talking he went on making up his mind about her. . . .

"I always thought that you might have been this ideal friend, for you look so good—but, alas ! you dislike me, you run away from me because you think that I am one of those dangerous women of whom there are so many in the world . . . and really I am nothing worse than unhappy !"

In the vehemence of his protest Richard stood up abruptly. No ! He had never disliked her, nor wished to run away. . . . He had always felt the most profound respect for the wife of his associate, Torre Bianca. But he confessed that up to that moment he had not known her well.

"There is nothing strange about that. Sometimes people have a speaking acquaintance with some one for years and years, and think they know him . . . and suddenly they come really to see into this person's soul, and discover that he is very different from what they had imagined. For instance, after what you have just said, I . . ."

He stopped ; but his silence and the expression in his eyes gave Elena some idea of the impression her words had produced on him. She, too, stood up and coming near him, gave him her hand.

"Then . . . you are going to be my friend ? . . . the friend I need so much in order to go on living ? . . . You are going to advise me, to help me ?"



Troubled by her glance, the young man stammered a few confused words. But he took her hand and pressed it. Elena welcomed this reply to her request with childish delight.

"How happy I am! You will come to see me every day? You will go out riding with me, you will keep off those tiresome suitors of mine who keep following me around?"

Watson was somewhat surprised by the Marquésa's exuberant joy. He hadn't promised any of these things as a matter of fact; but he didn't dare try to correct his hostess' impression.

As though she had not the slightest doubt that he would accompany her on her rides, she burst out laughing, and said, with a mischievous gleam in her eye:

"And when we go out riding together, you will show me how to throw the lasso, won't you? I want so much to learn that little accomplishment. . . ."

Scarcely were the words out of her mouth when she saw how inopportune they were; for Watson turned his eyes away from her, and a shadow passed over his face, the shadow cast perhaps by a procession of memories. . . .

Instinctively she knew that the most vivid of the images before him was that of a girl throwing the lariat, and trying to teach him how to do it, on a golden afternoon, at the far end of a green meadow. To dispel the picture, Elena came close to him and put both hands on the lapels of his blouse. She wanted, apparently, to see her own reflection in his eyes, while in her own she seemed to be trying to concentrate all her powers of seduction.

"We are really friends?" she murmured. "Friends for good and all? Friends who can trust one another beyond all calumny and envy?"

At the magic of her touch and the fragrance she exhaled, the memory of the river bank and his happy hours with



Celinda grew faint, vanished. . . . There was something within him, nevertheless, which struggled to resist the influence that was trying to envelope him. He thought for a moment of those fatal women he had read about, and he moved his head as though about to shake it. . . . "No!" he raised his hands to his blouse lapels to detach her hands from them. But at the contact of his fingers with the soft, smooth skin of her hands, he stopped dismayed; and then, very gently, he caressed them. And when he looked into Elena's eyes, that were imploring a reply to her question he merely nodded. . . . "Yes!"

From that day on Watson became the Marquésa's only escort on her rides.

In front of Pirovani's former residence the half-breed in charge of the contractor's stables would take up his stand, holding the bridle of a white mare on which was a side-saddle. Then Richard would appear mounted on his horse. The Marquésa, in riding costume, was coming down the steps, while Pirovani, as though he had been waiting in hiding for her arrival, rushed up to her to offer his greeting, and suggest that he too knew how to ride.

But the "Señora Marquésa" would have none of his company.

"You have business to attend to, Señor Pirovani. My husband says that you've been away a good deal lately, and I don't like to hear that! The Señor Watson has more free time now, and he is going with me. . . ."

In time the Italian came to accept these words with a certain pleasure. What an interest the Marquésa took in his work! And could she, after all, show any more clearly how much all that concerned him was important to her? Besides, there was no particular reason to be jealous of Watson. Everyone always thought of him as engaged to the Rojas girl. . . . so, unwillingly enough, Pirovani would retire and betake himself to the dam.



At other times, when Elena was already mounted, Canterac would come riding down the street. Wouldn't she let him accompany her? But Elena would protest, making signs that meant "no" with her riding-whip.

"But I've told you several times that I don't want any escort but Mr. Watson," she told him quite frankly one morning. "Do go along, my dear captain, and finish up that grand surprise that you are getting ready for me."

Canterac, too, was disposed to accept Elena's choice of the American youth as an escort without too much bitterness. So long as it wasn't Pirovani!

He watched the two riders move down the road, and although he felt annoyed and disheartened, as he always did when Elena opposed his desires, he tried to conceal it, and stepped in at Moreno's.

The latter was reading a novel in front of the open window; as soon as he caught sight of Canterac he leaned out and began a report on the work in the park.

Canterac, from his horse, leaned forward listening with grave attention to the explanations that were pouring out of the window.

"I got Pirovani's men away from him by offering them double pay. And I got hold of all the carts he had contracted to get, and all those in Fuerte Sarmiento. This will delay the work at the dam a little. But both you and Pirovani will have to find some way of making up for lost time."

Thirty miles down the river, in a somewhat swampy bit of ground, where the freshets had provided water enough for a vigorous growth of poplars and other trees, Canterac's men were hard at work carrying out his plans for the Marquésa's park. The *peons* were removing the earth from the tree roots which they cut away, bending down the trees until they fell on the ox carts waiting to drag them slowly back up the river bank to the dam. It took a whole day to make the journey to La Presa.



"It's a tremendous job, and it's going to be a long one," Moreno was saying. "I went down there yesterday to see for myself how things were getting on, and there's no doubt about it, those men are earning their pay."

Near La Presa, in a level spot barren of all vegetation near the river, other *peons* were digging ditches. As soon as the carts arrived, they lifted off the trees, and planted them in the holes prepared for them, heaping up the earth around them to keep the trees upright.

"The trees are only a few yards high, but they will be very effective in the desert where there are no others to compare them with. You can be sure of one thing, captain! The whole settlement will be struck dumb with amazement when they see what you have done. Pirovani could certainly never have planned all that!"

Canterac heartily approved of the last words.

"You are going to spend every cent of your several thousand *pesos*," Moreno went on, "It may even happen that you'll run short of money before you get through. But you'll have your park! Of course there won't be any cost in keeping it up, because a few days after the *fiesta* the trees will be withered and dead."

And the Government employee laughed at the uselessness of this enormous expenditure. At one and the same moment he pitied and admired the engineer.

Meanwhile, Elena and Watson were riding slowly along the river bank. The Marquésa had taken possession of one of his hands, and she was talking affectionately to him, with an air of maternal interest and tenderness.

"From what you tell me, Ricardo, it is evident that Robledo is managing the whole business, and that you are, after all, but an employee of his. . . . I have no right to intrude on your affairs, but, in spite of myself, everything that concerns you interests me so much! I don't say that he is not quite fair in his division of the earnings . . .



no ! Robledo is the sort of man who is always *correct* in his dealings. But just the same, I think he takes advantage of the fact that you are younger. You will have to emancipate yourself from his control or you will never go as far as your ability makes me expect you to go . . . but you'll have to make your way alone, without guardians to check you. . . ."

Watson had defended his partner against Elena's first insinuations ; but now with eyebrows drawn close together and a worried expression he let her go on without offering a word of protest.

The two were swaying in their saddles while they talked, yielding to the motions of their horse. As they rode along they noticed another rider appear and then disappear in the distance ahead of them. This occurred several times. The rider zig-zagging thus capriciously from river bank to the sand dunes that the spring floods some distance from the river had formed, was no other than Celinda Rojas.

Elena was the first to mention what both were well aware of.

" I think she is looking for some one," she said maliciously.

Richard looked in the direction to which she was pointing, and his expression showed plainly enough that he was perturbed.

" It is the Señorita de Rojas," he said blushing slightly. " She's still nothing but a kid ! I know her quite well. She is like a younger sister to me, or, rather, a pal. . . . You don't for a moment imagine . . . "

But Elena was smiling ironically as though she did not believe what he was saying ; and finally in a tone so cold that it hurt the youth's feelings, she commanded :

" Go and speak to her, otherwise she will be following and watching us all the afternoon. Then come back to me ! "

Obediently, the young man turned into the rough *matorral* brush that crackled like dry wood under his horse's hoofs.



Celinda at once stopped her cavorting in the distance and galloped to meet him, shaking her finger at him as she came near, and looking as like an offended school-teacher as she could. With tremendous seriousness she enquired :

“ Haven’t I told you more than a hundred times, Mr. Watson, that I didn’t want to see you with that . . . woman ? Besides, I have been riding everywhere these last few days without finding you—and then, when at last I do stumble upon you, I find you in bad company ! ”

But Richard Watson was no longer the youth she had known. He no longer greeted her foolish little speeches with an outburst of laughter. On the contrary, he looked offended, though her tone had been a jesting one. Drily he replied :

“ I shall keep what company I choose, Señorita. There is, I believe, nothing more between us than a sincere friendship, in spite of what people may choose to say. You are not engaged to me, nor do I need to limit my acquaintance simply to satisfy your whims.”

Celinda was speechless with astonishment. Taking advantage of this fact, Watson saluted her in a coldly ceremonious fashion, and galloped off in the direction taken by Elena. But when the girl became convinced that the young North American was really riding away from her, she angrily shook her fist in the air ; then she broke into supplicating cries.

“ Don’t go, *gringuito*, listen, Don Ricardo ! Don’t be angry. . . . Look ! What I said was just for fun, like the other times. . . . ”

But he pretended not to hear ; and as he continued riding away from her, she gathered up the lasso that hung on the front of the saddle and swung it, catching the fugitive in the noose, and shouting out with forced merriment :

“ See, disobedient one, now you must come here ! ”

The thong had fallen over his head with the same pre-



cision as always. As on so many other occasions she drew in the loops, tugging gently at her prey. But this time Richard took out his knife and angrily cut through the rope. So quickly did he free himself that Celinda, absorbed in pulling in the lasso, nearly fell off her horse when her tugging suddenly ceased to find any resistance.

Watson rode rapidly away, unwinding from about his shoulders the piece of rope that had caught him there. He threw the fragment from him and never once looked back. Celinda, meanwhile, was winding up her lasso that still trailed weakly on the ground.

When finally the lacerated end of the rope reached her hands she looked at it sadly. Tears blurred her sight. But suddenly the rancher's daughter looked out towards the dunes where Elena and Richard were riding, and turned white with anger.

"May the devil carry you away with him, miserable *gringo*! I don't want to see you, ever again. . . . I'll never throw the noose over you any more! And if, some day, you want to see me, you'll have to catch me the way I used to catch you . . . if you can!"

And then, no longer able to conceal from herself the fact that she had been cruelly treated, the Rojas girl covered her face with her hands. The sand dunes and the solitary river which had so many times seen her laugh should not now see her weep. . . .



## CHAPTER XII

THE day set for Canterac's great surprise party to the Marquésa had arrived. Under Moreno's direction, the workmen set up the last trees on the level space near the river.

Groups of curiosity seekers were already admiring from afar the Frenchman's improvisation of a wood. From Fuerte Sarmiento and from as far as the capital of the territory of Neuquen sight-seers were arriving, attracted by the novelty of the *fiesta* that was to be given at La Presa. Some workmen were still busy swinging ropes of vines from tree to tree, and nailing up clusters of banners.

Friterini, raised to the proud rank of head-waiter, had taken his somewhat dusty swallow-tail out of his trunk, and had donned this relic of the days when he had served as emergency waiter in the hotels of Europe and Buenos Aires. Throwing out his stiff shirt bosom, and nervously struggling every few minutes with his white tie, he directed the operations of a troupe of half-breed women from the *boliche*, who had been transformed into waitresses and were setting the tables for the afternoon's entertainment.

Don Antonio, in other words, the *gallego*, had also been transformed, at least outwardly, for the occasion. He wore a black suit and a thick gold chain dangled across his waistcoat. Don Antonio was one of the guests of the occasion; his right to figure among the important personages of the settlement had been recognised. However, as the refreshments had been entrusted to his establishment, he had thought it advisable to transfer himself to the scene of the festivities as early in the afternoon as possible in order to



see to it that the preparations were properly attended to.

Among the spectators on the other side of the wire enclosure were several *gauchos*, among them the notorious Manos Duras, who after the affair at the *boliche* had quietly returned to the settlement in order to offer the explanations he thought adequate. He did not for a moment deny that some of those who had provoked the affair were friends of his, but they were all older and more experienced men than he, so he couldn't very well be responsible for their acts. He wasn't their father. When the row occurred he was far away from the settlement. What was the idea, anyway, in trying to implicate him in things for which he was not to blame?

The *comisario* had to content himself with these explanations; the proprietor of the *boliche* also made haste to accept them, in the belief that it was better to number the *gaucho* among one's friends than one's enemies. And now Manos Duras stood contemplating with a somewhat mocking stare the preparations for the garden party. The other *gauchos*, as silent as he, seemed to be laughing to themselves at all the goings-on. Those *gringos*, carrying trees away from the spot where God had planted them . . . and for a woman!

The inhabitants of La Presa were more outspoken in their comments. In fact, some were quite vociferous about them, and the better-dressed of the women expressed themselves very freely on the subject of the Marquésa.

"That great big doll . . . *tal!* What she gets the men to do for her!"

And they rehearsed the expenditures that Pirovani, close, even hard-fisted in his dealings with the workmen, had made for her. Every single day the train from Buenos Aires or Bahía Blanca brought in presents for the Marquésa, and all paid for out of the contractor's pocket. And then there was the cart with a great tank set upon it, that did nothing



else all day long but bring water from the river to the Marquésa's house, just because she had to have a bath every day.

"She must have something on her skin that won't come off," some of the women gravely asserted.

To all of them, obliged as they were to go to the river with a jar on their hips when they wanted water, this tank and cart represented the most unheard of and extravagant of comforts. A bath every day in that land where the slightest breath of wind raised columns of fine dust, columns so enormous that one had to bend down towards the ground in order to keep one's balance under their impact. . . . And as every woman in the settlement had in her hair and the linings of her clothes the accumulated dust of a week, this extravagance in the use of water enraged them all. It reminded them too vividly of the differences and similarities between them and the Marquésa. She had the things they had not ; but she was a woman like them . . . yet she never for a moment shared in the life of this desert community as they knew it. . . .

To console herself, one of them maliciously alluded to the Marqués.

"And to think that he's likely to come along this afternoon with his wife's lovers ! Would you believe that a man could be so blind ? No, they must both be in the game. . . ."

And in this fashion those who had not been invited, and who had no other means of seeing the celebration than by peering through the wire fence, were consoling themselves by making hostile remarks about the Marquésa, her friends and her husband.

Celinda rode her horse past the different groups ; and she too looked resentfully at the hastily improvised park. Then, perhaps so as not to hear the scandalous remarks of the women, she made off towards the town.



Without for a moment neglecting to keep an eye on the preparation of the tables for the refreshments, Gonzalez was talking with several of his customers, and pointing to the river. He couldn't have found a better occasion for repeating with professorial gravity, some of the things he had heard his compatriot Robledo say about it.

The Indians had named the river "Black" because of the trouble they had in paddling up its course against the swift current. Then the Spanish explorers named it "river of the willows" because in former times so many of these trees grew along its banks. There were fewer of them now, but they still constituted the greatest obstacle to navigation, so many were the roots and tree-trunks that rose like rams' horns to batter in the sides of small craft venturing on these waters. Several centuries passed before it was explored; meanwhile, the assertion made by the Indians that it was possible to travel on its waters as far as Chile and that it formed a link between the Atlantic and Pacific, thus providing a canal far more accessible than the Strait of Magellan, was generally believed.

An English missionary attempted to explore it in the hope that his discoveries would make it possible for England to take possession of the region, and that this waterway would give her a vantage point for attacking the Spanish colonies in the Pacific.

"And then the Spaniards, who had plenty to do because they owned most of America, thought they had better get busy.

"It was Alfarez de la Armada, whom they called Villamarino, who, in the last third of the eighteenth century, when almost the whole of America had been explored and colonised, performed this difficult and obscure task.

"Don Manuel says that Villamarino is the last representative of the great race of Spanish explorers," asserted the *gallego*.



“ With four small boats, heavily laden and not at all adequate to the journey, he started from Carmen de Patagones on the Atlantic side with an escort of sixty men. This handful of whites was going to plunge into a totally unknown country, in which the most savage and blood-thirsty Indians of the Southern continent were to be found. It was from the banks of the Rio Negro that the invasions of the civilized lands of the viceroy of La Plata started ; rather than invasions they were raids by dark-skinned horsemen excited by the prospect of leading off as booty the sleek cattle of the ranches around Buenos Aires. So, with his four little boats, Villamarino was going to navigate for hundreds of leagues between banks on which lay in ambush bands of Aucas, the fiercest and most warlike of the native tribes.

“ Only those of us who know how violent the current of this river can be at times can imagine something of what that expedition must have been like, navigating against the current, in boats propelled by long poles and a bit of sail. They took along fifteen horses to drag the boats along the shore in the places where there was no way of getting through the tangle of roots, or where the rapids against them were too strong. Four different times the high winds snapped off the masts. . . . Yes, as Don Manuel puts it, Villamarino was the last flash of that fire of courage that had burnt in the Spanish *Conquistadores* for nearly four centuries. The expedition went on month after month. As they had no *baquiano* or guide, they often mistook the way and went up tributaries, so that they had to retrace their steps sometimes for many miles. . . . They were looking for the sea that the Indians talked about so often. And at last, at the end of the Limay, which is a part of the Rio Negro, they came out on a sea—but an inland one—nothing more than Lake Nahuel Huapi. . . . But one thing is certain, and that is that until this river is cleaned up



no modern explorer, not even with the boats we have now, is going to repeat the trip that the ensign Villamarino started out on a century and a-half ago."

Carried away by his patriotic enthusiasm, Gonzalez went on repeating to his hearers all that the engineer had told him ; but his audience was rapidly melting away, attracted by the preparations for lunch. To most of them the sight of the tables elaborately decorated for the occasion was far more interesting than the *gallego's* rhapsodies about the young officer of the Spanish navy, and his descriptions of the ancient " River of the Willows " . . . .

The crowd was fast increasing. An orchestra composed of a few Italians, who lived near Neuquen, began to pierce the air with the strident notes of their brass instruments. At once several couples began to dance. This struck Don Antonio as a serious lack of respect for the organiser of the festivities.

" Don't let them dance until the Marquésa arrives," he commanded to Friterini. " This party is in her honour, and the Señor Canterac won't like it if it begins before she gets here."

But neither musicians nor dancers had the slightest consideration for Don Antonio's scruples.

Elena, meanwhile, most elegantly dressed for the party, was sitting in the drawing-room at home ; and she was frowning.

" Such things as this happen to no one but me," she was thinking. " Why in the world should this news get here to-day, and just before the garden party ? And yet some people don't believe in fate ! "

That day happened to be one of those on which the train came down from Buenos Aires bringing the mail. A short time after it had reached the house, Torre Bianca, his face white and full of consternation, came to his wife's room to show her a letter.



"Look, Elena. . . . This is from our family lawyer. . . ."

A glance at the sheet he held out to her showed her what the letter was. It announced the death of Federico's mother.

*"Ever since you went away to America, the Señora Marquésa's health has been very bad. We all of us knew that the end might come at any moment. She was thinking of you when she died. We heard her speak your name even after we thought she would never say another word."*

*"We enclose a few particulars about the estate which, unfortunately . . ."*

Elena stopped reading to look with inquiring eyes at her husband. But he stood with his head sunk between his shoulders, as though stricken by the news. She hesitated about speaking; but as time passed and he still stood brooding in silence, she said slowly:

"I suppose that this news, which really can't have been so unexpected—you remember you said several times that you feared this must happen soon—isn't going to keep us from going to the garden *fête*?"

Torre Bianca raised his eyes and looked at her in amazement.

"What are you saying? Don't you understand that it is my mother who has died?"

Elena pretended to be somewhat embarrassed; then she said in a tone of kindly sympathy:

"I am so sorry to hear of the poor lady's death! She was your mother, and that in itself is enough to make me grieve for her. But you must remember, Federico, that I never saw her and that she knew me only from photographs. Do be calm and try to be reasonable! Just because, on the other side of the globe, this unhappy event has occurred, we surely aren't going to deprive ourselves of going to a



*fiesta* that represents a tremendous outlay of money, and that has been prepared especially for us, by our friend. . . .”

She drew near to her husband, and said in a melting voice, while she caressed his cheek :

“ After all, dear, one must have a certain regard for social conventions. No one knows about this yet. Just pretend that the letter hasn’t arrived and that you receive it in the day after to-morrow’s mail. . . . Yes, that is the best way to manage it. You don’t know this sad news yet, and you are coming with me this afternoon. . . . What do you gain by remembering it now ? There is time enough to think of this unfortunate happening later. . . .”

The Marqués indicated that he did not agree with her. Then he raised a hand to his eyes and leaning one elbow on his knees he groaned softly to himself :

“ She was my mother . . . my poor, old, loving mother. . . .”

They were both silent for a long time. Then, as though unwilling to let his wife see the grief he felt, the Marqués took refuge in the adjoining room. Elena, scowling to herself, and in a thoroughly bad humour, could hear him walking to and fro on the other side of the door, and every now and then she heard him groan. Finally, she opened the door through which the Marqués had disappeared.

“ You had better stay here, Federico. Don’t worry about me. I’ll go alone and make up an excuse for your absence. I’ll see you later then, *alma mia* ! Of course you know that the only reason why I am leaving you now is so as not to hurt our friends’ feelings. Oh, what a bore these social obligations are !”

It was strange to hear the gently pitying tones of her voice when at the same time the corners of her mouth were tense and twisted with anger.

She put on her hat and went out. From the top of the



stairs she could see the street that was for once completely deserted. Everyone in town had gone to see the "park," Canterac and the contractor, each acting independently, having declared the occasion a general holiday, forcing a day of idleness upon their subordinates.

In front of the house there was a small, four-wheeled cart in charge of a half-breed who was asleep on the driver's seat, a Paraguay cigar between his thick bluish lips. A swarm of flies buzzed about his sweat-smeared face.

Elena was thinking now of her admirers who must by this time be impatiently looking for her. They had refrained from coming to get her, inasmuch as the day before she had announced to them that she wished to arrive at the party with no other escort than her husband. Elena had come to believe that a lady always avoids giving any occasion for gossip.

As she turned away from the house and approached the cart, she heard a sound of galloping hoofs. A rider suddenly appeared from one of the adjoining narrow streets. It was Flor de Rio Negro.

Elena, by a kind of intuition, like the instinctive alarm of an animal when something hostile is approaching it, guessed that it was she who was coming before she saw her. Without waiting for the horse to stop, the reckless young rider slipped out of the saddle to the ground. Then, with the slow gait of one who has not walked for some hours and is surprised by the strange, hard feel of the ground, she approached Elena.

"Señora, a word with you, only one!"

She stepped in between Elena and the cart, cutting her off.

In spite of her cold *hauteur*, Elena was startled by the girl's hostile eyes. However, she tried to preserve her impressive calm, and with a gesture seemed to inquire:

"Can it really be me you want?"



Celinda, quick enough to understand her, replied with a nod. As the Marquésa lifted her hand, in an affectation of queenliness, giving the girl permission to speak, Celinda asked in a tone that was sharp and resonant with hate :

“ Haven’t you enough with all these men you are driving mad ? Must you take away those who belong to other women too ? ”

Elena offered nothing by way of reply but a withering glance that swept the girl from head to foot. Surely she was sufficiently superior to crush the impudent young thing with a look. . . .

“ I don’t know you,” Elena was forced to say as the girl still barred her passage. “ Besides, there are such differences in rank and education separating us that it is useless for me to try to talk to you.”

She tried then to brush Celinda aside ; but the girl, irritated beyond bearing by her contemptuous glance, raised the small riding whip she held in her left hand.

“ You devil in skirts ! ”

She aimed a blow at Elena’s face ; but the latter defended herself promptly, clutching at her assailant’s arm. The older woman was intensely pale, and her eyes had grown larger with amazement, while a feline light gleamed in her pupils. Then she said in a voice that was slightly hoarse :

“ That will do Don’t trouble . . . I’ll consider the blow as given . . . and I shan’t forget the gift ! I’ll return something equivalent when the proper time comes. . . . ”

She let go her grip of Celinda’s arm. The girl seemed to have poured out all her rage. With arms hanging limp, she stood motionless, as though repenting of her attack on her enemy.

Elena made good use of this momentary respite, and, climbing into the cart, tapped the driver on the shoulder to



arouse him from the sleep in which he had been, quite undisturbed by the scene going on within two feet.

As soon as they had got beyond the limits of the town, Elena caught sight of the park and of the crowd streaming around it. A rider was cantering in the opposite direction as though coming back from the party. With a great sweep of his hat he saluted her. Recognising Manos Duras, she smiled mechanically in response to his greeting. Then, without seriously taking account of what she was doing, she beckoned to him. The *gaucho* instantly swung his horse around and rode up to the cart, following alongside.

"How are you, Señora? Why are you so pale?"

Elena made an effort to regain her serenity. She must still bear the traces of her recent violent emotions, and she wanted to reach the *fiesta* tranquil and smiling. No one must divine the insult she had just received. . . .

As though eager to put an end as quickly as possible to her conversation with Manos Duras, she asked him gaily:

"You told me one day that you admired me and that you were ready to do anything I might ask you, no matter how terrible. . . ."

Manos Duras again raised his hand to his hat in salutation, and smiled, showing his sharp wolf's teeth.

"Command what you will, Señora. Shall I kill someone for you?"

As he spoke he looked at her with eyes in which glittered a wolfish desire. Elena pretended to shrink back in alarm from what his words suggested.

"Kill! Oh, no! What do you take me for? On the contrary, the favour I ask of you ought to be one you take pleasure in granting. Well, we'll talk it over. I'll let you know when I need you. . . ."

As the *gaucho* lingered over his farewells, she indicated with a vigorous gesture that he must leave her. They were now near the site of the "park," and it would scarcely do



for the Marquésa to arrive without her husband and with such an escort.

Manos Duras reined in his horse to watch the cart roll down the road. For some minutes his eyes followed that most extraordinary and fascinating of all the women he had ever encountered. Then, as she passed out of sight, his submissive watch-dog's expression changed to one of harsh aggressiveness.

The guests were entering the artificial park in full view of the envious populace who were constrained, by the *comisario's* vigilance, and that of his four henchmen, to remain outside the wire fence. The guests were, for the most part, Spanish and Italian merchants from the nearest small towns. Some of them had come from as far as the island of Choel-Choel, the last stopping-place of the few boats navigating up the river. Also the foremen and machinists of the works were arriving with their wives, arrayed in the clothes that they kept packed away for their excursions to Bahía Blanca or Buenos Aires.

Robledo was wandering through the short avenues of the park, looking ironically about at Canterac's absurd creation. Moreno was pointing out with a good deal of pride the particularly admirable features of that part of the work which he had attended to himself.

"The handsomest thing of all is a kind of summer-house or shrine of flowers at the end of the arbour. Undoubtedly the captain will try to carry off the Marquésa and keep her there awhile, but she's clever enough, she'll know how to get away when she wants to. . . ."

He winked knowingly as he spoke of Canterac's plans; then, very gravely, by way of affirming still further his belief in the Marquésa's prudence, he remarked that "she was not the kind of woman that some people believed her to be."

He seemed disposed to show Robledo the remarkable



"shrine of flowers" when suddenly he sped away, mumbling excuses, in the direction of the entrance to the park. Elena was arriving! And, just as he ran, so did her admirers; but, after greeting them all three, she quite frankly showed her preference for Watson, who had, with a somewhat more dignified pace, also gone to meet her. Even while she talked to the others she did not cease looking at the youth with caressing glances. Robledo, watching the group from afar, was immediately aware of the preference Elena was betraying for his young partner.

Annoyed by this discovery, he drew near to pay his respects to the guest of honour. Then he turned to Watson, and, in a low tone, asked him to take a turn through the tree-bordered *allée*. But Watson pretended not to understand him. Finally Canterac, who, as the creator of the *fiesta*, assumed an overwhelming superiority, interposed, and separating Elena from the others, offered her his arm. He must show her all the beauties of his park. . . . Robledo took advantage of this diversion to lead Watson away under the trees. Scarcely were they alone when, in a fatherly tone, and with a slight nod, leaning on Canterac's arm, he said:

"Take care, Richard, my boy! This Circe of ours is trying to subdue you, too, to her enchantments. . . ."

But Watson, who had always listened deferentially to his partner up to the present, now looked haughtily at him.

"I am old enough to know how to take care of myself," he replied drily. "Besides, when I want advice I shall ask for it."

Muttering a few words that Robledo could not make out, young Watson turned his back on him and left him.

Robledo was startled by the boy's manner. Then he grew indignant.

"This woman again! She goes too far . . . robbing me of my best friend. . . ."



The most interesting part of the *fiesta*, as far as the majority of the guests were concerned, was about to begin. Friterini began to shout out orders to the half-breeds who were to be the waitresses of the occasion. On the tables, made of boards laid on small wooden horses, and covered with recently laundered table-cloths, the rarest and most savoury delicacies of the *boliche* and the other dispensaries of meat and drink in the immediate vicinity of Rio Negro were being assembled. From Europe and the distant parts of America came choice morsels that had a flavour of tin and tin-foil. There were potted meats from Chicago, Frankfort's famous sausages, French *pâté de foie gras*, Galician sardines, peppers from Rioja, olives from Seville, all of them foods that had crossed the ocean in metal boxes or wooden crates.

Most extraordinary of all were the drinks. Only a few *gringos*, those who were natives of the so-called "Latin countries," paid any attention to the bottles of dusky wine. The other guests, especially the native sons of the soil, considered all beverages of a reddish hue very ordinary drinks indeed, and quite beneath their notice. In their opinion, the clearness and colourlessness of a wine was a mark of its aristocracy. The popping of champagne corks resounded continuously. And many were there who tossed off the sparkling wines as though they were water.

"All this would be pretty expensive in Europe," exclaimed a greasy-faced Russian. "But here, with the difference in exchange . . . !"

The order-loving Moreno contemplated the increasing thirst of the guests with considerable anxiety. At the same time, with mysterious gestures, and words muttered in passing, he admonished the enthusiastic Friterini, urging him to be sparing and prudent.

"Provided Canterac's *pesos* hold out ! " he said to himself. "But it begins to look as though we wouldn't have money enough to pay for it all."



Meanwhile the Frenchman, with Elena on his arm, was walking under the trees, or stopping to point out the largest of them to his companion.

"This is scarcely the park of Versailles, *bella Marqués*," he was saying, imitating the gallantry of past centuries. "But, however humble it may be, it represents the great interest that one man here takes in making himself agreeable to you. . . ."

Priovani, pretending to be absorbed in his thoughts, was following them from a moderate distance. He could not conceal how much this garden fête, conceived and executed by his rival, annoyed him. He had to acknowledge that he would never have been able to think of anything like this. It only proved what an advantage it was to have had an education. . . .

As he advanced through the artificial park, he tried, without being seen, to push with all his weight against the trees nearest him in the hope that they would fall over. But his evil desires were of no avail. All the trees stood firmly erect and immovable. That fool of a Moreno had done things well in so far as helping Canterac was concerned.

But the Italian's hands turned cold and all his blood seemed to rush to his heart when he saw the couple he was following disappear in an arbour of dense foliage at the far end of a tree-bordered avenue. This was Moreno's "shrine of flowers."

"Now the queen can sit on her throne," said Canterac. And he pointed to a rustic bench which had a kind of canopy over it, made of garlands of foliage and paper flowers.

Excited by finding himself alone with the Marquésa, the engineer began to talk in an impassioned manner of his love for her and of the sacrifices he was ready to make for her. He had often gone on in this way before, but never with such intensity. Stimulated by the success of his plans



up to this point, he was nearly beside himself at the thought of having a prolonged *tête-à-tête* with Elena in the bower he had made for her.

She sat down on the rustic bench with the engineer by her side, but, although still wearing a provocative smile, she seemed a trifle uneasy. Canterac seized both her hands, and leaned over towards her mouth. Elena, on her guard, eluded him, and struggled to free herself from his grasp.

This struggle was going on when Pirovani appeared at the entrance to the bower. But neither of its two occupants could see him. The contest continued, Canterac bent on reaching the Marquésa's lips, Elena, unmindful now of her coquettish pruderies, violently repulsing him.

"This isn't fair," she panted. "And my hair will be all disarranged! You are going to spoil my hat. . . . Do, please, stop! If you don't I shall leave you!"

She was defending herself so energetically that Pirovani thought it the moment to intervene. He resolutely stepped into the "shrine." At sight of him Canterac let go his hold of Elena and stood up. While the Marquésa picked up her hairpins and straightened her hat, the two men glared at one another. Finally the Italian spoke.

"You seem in great haste," he remarked sarcastically, "to collect your pay for what the party has cost you."

To Canterac it seemed so incredible that the contractor should dare insult him to his face, and in the costly park that was his own invention, that he remained speechless for several seconds. Then his anger, the anger of the man accustomed to commanding and receiving obedience, broke out in a cold, blinding flash.

"What right have *you* to speak to *me*? . . . I ought to have known better than to have invited as my guest an ignorant emigrant, who has made his money, God knows how. . . ."

Pirovani became furious, raging at receiving such an insult



and before Elena. And, as the hot violence within him clamoured for satisfaction, by way of reply he threw himself upon the engineer and struck him a heavy blow. In a flash the two men came to grips and were bending backwards and forwards in desperate attempts to gain the advantage ; and Elena, her serenity quite gone, was crying out in alarm.

There was a general rush towards the bower, Robledo and Watson arriving first, and together. The engineer and the contractor, tightly grasping one another, were rolling on the floor, breaking down as they did so a part of the " shrine."

Pirovani, heavier and more powerful than Canterac, was crushing the latter with his weight. Rage had made the contractor forget all the Spanish he knew, and in Italian he was hurling out blasphemies alluding to the Virgin and most of the inhabitants of heaven ; and imploring those who were trying to separate him from the Frenchman to let him eat his adversary's " gizzard." In a few seconds he had reverted to the years of his adolescence when in some " gin shop " of the Genoese waterfront, he would knock down some one of his companions in poverty, and roll on the ground with him, hurling epithets even more violent than his blows.

By dint of vigorous pulling and the application of several fists, some of the men finally succeeded in separating the two assailants. Watson, with utter contempt for both of them, rushed to the Marquésa and stood in an attitude of defence before her as though she were menaced by some danger.

Robledo looked at the two rivals. Each one of them from the midst of the group that had gathered round him was insulting the other, eyes bloodshot, tongue thick and stammering with rage. Both of them had for the moment forgotten all the Spanish they had learnt, and were eiacu-



lating the worst words they knew in their respective native languages.

Then he turned to look at the Marquésa, who was sighing and exclaiming like a child, while she leaned against Richard Watson.

“ Now we’re in for it,” muttered Robledo to himself. “ There’ll be murder done yet for that woman ! ” and without looking again at Watson he turned away.



## CHAPTER XIII

WATSON and Robledo finished their supper in silence, their thoughts still busy with what had occurred a few hours earlier in the park of Canterac's invention.

An invisible wall seemed to have risen between them. Watson's expression was sombre, and he avoided looking at his partner. The latter, when from time to time he glanced at him, smiled bitterly. He could not now see Watson without thinking of Elena. Undoubtedly it was she, tormented as she was by her desire to control every man in whom she was interested, who had aroused the young American's feeling against him!

Watson got up from table with a few mumbled words, and picked up his hat.

"So, he's going to see her," thought Robledo. "He is restless if he can't be by her side."

In the main street Watson found various groups engaged in heated discussion. The red rectangles of the windows and doors of the *boliche* were frequently eclipsed by the shadows of the customers going in and out. It was not hard to guess that the subject under discussion was the scandalous occurrence of that afternoon, and that everyone was taking sides either with the French engineer or the Italian contractor.

When he reached Elena's house, Sebastiana came out and stood at the top of the outside staircase waiting for him to come up. She, too, he could see, was thinking about what had happened at the "park."

The half-breed looked at Richard with a good deal of



severity. "Ay, those men! . . . Here was this *gringo* who had seemed such a good young man and see how he was treating her little girl, her *nina* Celinda! So he was not different from the others. . . ."

The young engineer walked in without meeting Sebastian's eye, and found Elena in the drawing-room. She seemed to be expecting him.

He was about to sit down in an arm-chair but she would have none of it.

"No, no, here beside me—so no one will hear us."

And he sat down on the sofa beside her.

She was pale, and there was a hard expression in her eyes, as though she were still in the grip of recent and very disagreeable experiences. The fight between Pirovani and Canterac now occupied the second place in her thoughts. The thing that was in the very forefront of her mind was the image of Celinda with her upraised whip. At that image she trembled with anger.

But Richard's punctual arrival made her forget her resentment. So, he was glad to grant her request that he would spend the evening with her. . . . She saw that he was looking somewhat uneasily at the doors leading into the room.

"No one will come in," she reassured him. "My husband is in his room, a little upset by some bad news from home that he received to-day. . . . A family affair that doesn't much concern me."

With a sudden softening in her voice, she went on :

"How grateful I am to you for coming! I fairly shook with terror at the thought of spending these hours alone. . . . I am so frightfully bored here! That is why I begged you when we parted this afternoon not to leave me all alone. . . ."

And she caught up Watson's hand, and looked at him with a caress in her eyes.



The young man was agreeably flattered by her glances, but at once there arose in his mind a memory of what had happened earlier that day.

"What were those men fighting about? Was it about you?"

She did not answer at once; finally, looking away, she said with a kind of surrender:

"Perhaps. But I despise them both. You are the only man here I care about, Ricardo."

She laid her hands on his shoulders; and with a feline undulation she brought her face close to his.

"I suspect," she murmured, "I suspect that we two are going beyond the limits of friendship. . . ."

Stimulated by the novelty of being alone with one another, they became conscious of the daring and vehement desire burning hotly within them. In a few short minutes they were going to cover a distance that in his inexperience he thought would have required several long days' journeys.

She, meanwhile, thought of the young Amazon whose riding-whip had almost struck her in the face. Her outraged vanity, and her desire for vengeance, made her decide upon a cynical course of action; she laughed to herself, and her laugh was reflected in a cruel glint in her eyes.

"If you're jealous, you ought to have some reason for it," Elena was thinking. "I'll pay you back for your whip-blow."

In addition, when she perceived that those other two men had fought one another in her presence without causing her any but the most trifling emotion, she decided, with a lack of logic characteristic of her unbalanced brain, that the surest way to make peace between them was to give herself to a third, one who should be more deserving of her interest.

To Watson, since the moment when two men had tried to kill one another for her sake, this woman seemed all the



more beautiful and desirable. A feeling of male pride and sex vanity mingled with the emotions that Elena's words and the contact with her graceful body were arousing in him.

The hands on his shoulders had imperceptibly crept closer and closer together. They met, and the young American felt himself imprisoned by two beautiful arms. Something awakened in his thoughts, like a little flame in a dying fire. He thought he saw before him the sad, noble face of his comrade Torre Bianca, and he tried to shake his head—"No!" and draw back, pushing Elena away. . . . He couldn't betray his friend. . . . It was unworthy of him to act in this fashion, under Torre Bianca's own roof. Then he saw himself and Celinda riding happily along together. Again he tried to move his head, "No!"; he blinked and looked profoundly distressed, trying to defend himself, and at the same time certain that he would be unable to do so.

"Poor little Flor de Rio Negro!" he thought.

The arms wound around his neck pressed gently against him, drawing his head slowly toward Elena's face; her hungry lips were close to his. Then their mouths met, and Richard thought the kiss would never end.

He felt all the surprise of one who on entering a marvellous palace, sees the doors of a second and even more beautiful hall standing wide open before him; and he passes on through a third and a fourth until he is lost in the succession of dazzling rooms opening their doors to him.

He trembled at what her mouth revealed; shudders ran down his back.

At that moment, confusedly he thought, just like all the other simple folk at the dam who were in mad pursuit of Elena: "This is woman, the real woman who rules the world! . . . It is only the women who have known the elegancies of life who are worthy of a man's admiration and worship. . . ."



His hands, as he tried to free himself from the power that threatened to drown his will, came in contact with the soft curves of her body. . . .

Suddenly, from the other side of the door, came a vigorous knocking. Sebastiana was pounding away on the bare boards with her knuckles, in this fashion asking permission to enter, for the half-breed was too well-trained to come in without announcing her intention. However, before asking permission in this way, she always took the precaution to look through the keyhole. When, finally, her head appeared between the two wooden slides of the door, she said, lowering her malicious eyes :

“ My old boss, Don Pirovani, wants to see the Marquésa. He seems to be in a hurry.”

Richard stood up to go. Elena gave him to understand that she would get rid of the intruder very quickly. But the young man had regained his composure, and, aware of the peril he had just escaped, he asked for nothing better than to make use of the opportunity to escape. He didn't want to stay alone with her again ! At the door he almost fell over the contractor, who came in, bowing from afar to the “ Señora Marquésa.” Watson shook hands with him and hurried away.

Elena scarcely took the trouble to hide her anger at this inopportune call, and received the Italian with quite obvious ill-humour.

She remained standing, to indicate that his stay was to be short, but, pre-occupied by his own troubles, he asked if he might sit down, and before Elena could reply, he sank into a chair. Elena merely leaned against the edge of the table.

“ My husband is ill,” she said, “ and I must look after him. It isn't anything to worry about . . . just an unfortunate occurrence in his family. But now let's talk about you. What brings you here at this hour ? ”



Pirovani delayed answering in order to make his words more impressive when he did finally utter them.

"The Señor Canterac says that after what happened this afternoon we must have a duel to the death."

Elena was thinking only of Watson, and this man's arrival, putting the young American to flight, made her tremble with nervousness. But for his news she had only a slight shrug. It really didn't interest her! Then she tried to conceal her indifference by saying:

"I don't see anything so strange about that. If I were a man, I would do the same."

Pirovani, who up to that time had been uncertain as to how he felt about Canterac's challenge, got up with an air of tremendous resolution.

"Then," he said, "if you think it is all right, there is nothing more to be said. I'll fight with the Frenchman, and I'll fight with half the world, if necessary, so that you'll be convinced that I am worthy of your esteem."

As he spoke he took Elena's hand. But it lay so inert in his own that he was discouraged, and let go of it. She looked wearily towards the interior of the house where her husband was, indicating to Pirovani that he was to take his leave. The Italian made haste to obey, but while he moved towards the door he irritated her still more with words and gestures designed to inspire admiration for his devotion and heroism.

As soon as she was alone, Elena called shrilly for Sebastian. The half-breed was slow in coming to her mistress. She had been escorting her former employer to the street.

"See if you can find the Señor Watson!" ordered Elena hastily. "He can't be so far away. Tell him to come back."

The half-breed smiled, lowered her malicious eyes, and said innocently.

"It isn't so easy to overtake him. He flew out of here



like a shot from a gun. The devil must have been after him ! ”

On leaving his former house, Pirovani went to see Robledo, whom he found reading a book that was propped up against the kerosene lamp in the centre of the table. When the Spaniard saw his caller, he greeted him with exclamations and reproaches.

“ What got into you ? Why do a thing like that ? . . . A man of your years and reputation ! . . . You’re not a fifteen-year-old fighting for your sweetheart ! ”

The Italian rejected this admonition with a haughty gesture, judging it rather tardy. Then he said solemnly, and as if his own words intoxicated his vanity :

“ I am fighting a duel to the death with Captain Canterac, and I want you and Moreno to be my seconds.”

Robledo broke out into exclamations of scandalised impatience.

“ But what do you take me for ? Do you think that I am going in for any of your nonsense, and making a fool of myself just to keep you company ? ”

And he went on with a vigorous tirade against Pirovani’s absurd request, the latter nodding obstinately all the while. He was determined to face everything now after what Elena had said.

“ I am a man of humble birth,” he said, “ I know nothing except how to work ; and I’ve got to show everybody that I’m not afraid of this gentleman, accustomed as he is to handling weapons.”

Robledo shrugged at these words, more absurd than anything that had preceded them. Finally, he grew tired of his useless protests.

“ I see that I might as well give up my attempts to knock a little commonsense into you. Very well ; I’ll consent to acting as your representative, but on condition that the affair is settled by reason and not by a duel.”



The contractor assumed the attitude becoming to a gentleman whose honour has just been slighted.

"No. I wish to have a duel . . . and to the death. I am not a coward and I didn't come here to find a way out."

Then he gave expression to what he was thinking.

"Although I never had much education, I know what ought to be done in cases like this one. And further, I know how certain people of high station look at it. I must fight and I shall fight."

He spoke with such sincerity that Robledo felt sure Elena must have inspired in him this ridiculous resolution. Undoubtedly, she was the person "of high station" who had advised poor Pirovani! Looking pityingly at him, he yet abruptly and emphatically refused to act as second.

Convinced finally that nothing was to be gained by further argument, Pirovani went away and betook himself to Moreno's.

The next day, early in the morning, Don Carlos Rojas, standing in the doorway of his ranch house, saw a rider approaching. The horseman was wearing "city clothes," and his mount made the rancher smile. It was Moreno.

"Where are you going on that graveyard nag, friend ink-spiller? Stop a while and have a *mate* with me, eh, *amigo*?"

They both went into the room used as a parlour and office, and while a small servant prepared the *mate*, Moreno caught a glimpse, through a doorway, of the rancher's daughter sitting in a wicker chair; she looked worried and unhappy, and in her feminine dress seemed to have lost the joyous, rebellious audacity which she always appeared to possess when she wore boys' clothes.

Moreno bowed to her from the room where he sat and she acknowledged his salutation with a sad little smile.

"There, you see! She's not herself at all, not the same girl any more. Anyone would think she was sick. That's the way it is with young people!"



Celinda shook her head. Sick? Oh, no, that wasn't it. . . . Then she left the room so that her father and his guest might speak more freely together.

When they had sipped their first cup of *mate*, Rojas offered Moreno a cigar "so that he would have something to puff at"; then lighting his own, he prepared to listen.

"What brings you to these parts, old boy? . . . You're not much given to riding, and when you come as far as this, it must be for some reason."

Moreno went on smoking with the calm of an oriental who considers it advisable to excite the curiosity of the person addressing him before taking any part in the conversation.

"Don Carlos," he said at last, "as a young fellow you had a good deal to do with firearms. When I was in Buenos Aires I heard that you'd fought in several duels on account of women."

Rojas looked cautiously about to see whether his daughter happened to be within earshot. Then he smiled with all the fatuous vanity of a man well on in years, at the memory of the bold, wild follies of his youth, and said, with an affectation of modesty:

"Bah! Nobody remembers that now! Boyish pranks . . . they don't do that sort of thing these days."

Moreno thought it proper to suspend the conversation by a long pause; then he announced:

"Canterac and Pirovani are fighting a duel to-morrow. They are going to shoot to kill."

Don Carlos was frankly amazed.

"But such things are out of fashion! . . . And here in this desert of a place?"

Moreno nodded and remained silent. The rancher also refrained from speaking, but he looked questioningly at his caller. What in the world had he, Don ~~Rojas~~ <sup>Rojas</sup>, to do with all this? And was it simply for the pleasure of giving him



this bit of news that the Government clerk had taken such a long ride ?

"The captain," said Moreno, "has arranged with the Marqués de Torre Bianca and the *gringo* Watson to be his seconds. As they're both of them his colleagues, they can't very well refuse."

This seemed quite a matter of course to Rojas. But what the devil was it to him who the seconds were ?

"Pirovani has only one second so far. That is myself," Moreno continued. "I came to ask you to help us out, Don Rojas. You know how to act in this sort of affair. I wish you'd serve with me as a second for our Italian friend."

But the rancher protested vehemently.

"Drop all this fool-business, man ! Why should I get mixed up in the squabbles of these people ? They're all my friends . . . and anyway I'm too old to have anything to do with this sort of thing. I don't care to cut that kind of figure at my age. . . ."

But Moreno was not to be put off so easily, and several minutes of heated argument followed. Finally, the rancher gave some signs of abandoning his first position. He was more won over by what seemed to him the mysterious nature of this duel than by any of Moreno's pleas. As a second he might learn some curious and interesting things. . . .

"Well, then, I'll do what you want. What the devil will this ink-spiller be after me for next ?"

Then he smiled slyly, slapping Moreno on the leg, and asked him, lowering his voice :

"And why do they want to kill one another ? About a woman, eh ? . . . Sure as I breathe, that Marquésa has something to do with it . . . she seems to drive all the men around her crazy. . . ."

Moreno assumed a mysterious expression, at the same



time raising his finger to his lips to impress Rojas with the need for caution.

"Careful, Don Carlos! Remember that the Marqués will be acting with us as a second in this duel. . . . Perhaps even, as an expert in this sort of thing, he will manage the whole affair."

The rancher began to laugh, again slapping his friend on the leg. So hearty was his laughter that at times he raised his hand to his throat as though choking in the outbursts of his amusement.

"That's a pretty thing, eh? So the husband is going to superintend the duel! And the fight is about his wife. . . . But these *gringos* are an amusing lot. . . . I'd like to see this business through! It beats anything I ever heard of. . . ."

Then he added gravely :

"Yes, I'll act as second. This is better than a play in Buenos Aires or one of those "movies" my little girl is so crazy about. . . ."

In the early afternoon, after lunching at the ranch, Moreno returned to the settlement; he dismounted in front of Pirovani's house.

Torre Bianca was walking up and down in the room he used as an office. He was in mourning and looked even more unhappy and discouraged than usual. In his pacing back and forth he stopped every now and then beside a table on which was an open case containing a brace of revolvers. He had spent a good part of the afternoon cleaning the weapons and looking at them meditatively as though the sight of them evoked distant memories. But at moments he forgot the revolvers and gazed at a photograph beside them on the table; it was his mother's, and as he looked at it tears filled his eyes.

After a ceremonious salutation, Moreno hastened to assure him that he had found another second, and that he came fully



authorised by him to discuss the preparations for the duel. The Marqués acknowledged his speech with a bow, and showed him the case of weapons.

"I brought them from Europe. They have played a part in several affairs at least as serious as this one. Look them over carefully. We have no others, and they will have to be found acceptable by both parties."

The Government clerk indicated that he considered such an examination as the Marqués suggested quite unnecessary, and that whatever the latter thought fit to suggest he would find quite acceptable.

The Marqués went on talking with a courtly dignity which deeply impressed Moreno.

"This poor worthy gentleman doesn't really know what this situation is," he thought. "Yet he is so good and likeable. . . . He evidently hasn't the faintest conception of what has been going on, of what his wife has been up to . . . nor of the unfortunate part that he himself is going to play. . . ."

"As neither of the two parties wishes to give any explanations, and as the offence is unquestionably serious, the duel will have to be to the death. Don't you agree with me?"

Moreno had assumed a portentously solemn expression as soon as he perceived how serious this conversation was to be, and now he silently nodded his approbation.

"My principal," the Marqués continued, "will not be satisfied with anything less than three shots at twenty paces with five seconds for taking aim."

Moreno blinked to show how amazed he was by these conditions, and wished to indicate that he was opposed to accepting them; but he remembered a second interview that he had had that morning with Pirovani before he set out for the Rojas ranch.

The Italian had appeared to be transformed by his belli-



cose enthusiasm. He rejoiced in this opportunity to present himself to the "Señora Marquésa" in the light of a novelesque hero.

"Accept all the conditions," he said to Moreno, "however frightful they may be. I want to make it quite clear that even though I started out in life a simple workman, I am more courageous and more of a gentleman than this French captain!"

So the Government employee ended by nodding.

"To-night," the Marqués continued, "all four seconds are to meet at Watson's place to put the conditions into writing, and to-morrow, as soon as it is light, the duel will take place."

Pirovani's representative called attention to the fact that Don Carlos Rojas would not be able to be present at this meeting because he had that afternoon set out for Fuerte Sarmiento in search of a doctor for the duel. But his friend had authorised him to subscribe to any conditions that might be set down. Whereupon the two seconds considered the interview at an end.

As Moreno went out of the house, he saw the Police Commissioner standing at the foot of the stairs leading to the street. Evidently the *comisario* was waiting for him. And Don Roque did not take long to express his indignation.

"You people seem to think that you can do anything you like, just as though there were no law in the land, no authority, no anything, just as though the Indians were still running it. Well, I'm the Police Commissioner, though you don't seem to know it, and it's my job to keep other people from doing all the crazy things they take it into their heads to do. When is that duel to take place? I must know."

Moreno was not disposed to give the information requested of him, and the *comisario*, in view of his disinclination to obey, went on in a gentler tone :



“ You might as well tell me without making any bones about it. You know very well that there isn’t one of you who would approve of such a thing taking place with me present in the town. Tell me when the thing is coming off. . . . So I can get out before it happens.”

Moreno murmured something in his ear and the *comisario* acknowledged the confidence by grasping the official’s hand. Then he walked towards his horse which was hitched near by, and just as he was about to mount it, he added, very low :

“ I am going to spend the night in Fuerte Sarmiento and I won’t be back until to-morrow afternoon. Do whatever you like. . . . I know nothing about it ! ”



## CHAPTER XIV

THE last of the customers to leave the *boliche* that evening were going home when Robledo stopped in front of the house Elena occupied.

He went softly up the stairs and, hesitating a few seconds, knocked gently at the door. After a very brief interval it opened, and Sebastiana appeared, thoroughly surprised at being summoned in this fashion just as she was going to bed. Her coarse hair was arranged in numerous braids, each one of which was tied at the end with a knot of ribbon or string, and with her enormous arms she tried to conceal a part of her copper-coloured and exuberant bosom freed from the compression of her corset. Her wrathful eyes, which gave warning of the hailstorm of abusive words with which she was planning to receive the importunate disturber of her peace, softened at sight of Robledo, and before he had time to speak, she was saying in the most amiable tone in the world :

“The mistress is in her bedroom and the Señor Marqués has gone out with his accursed pistol case. I thought he was at your house . . . but come in ; I’ll go call the Señora.”

Robledo had good reason to know that Torre Bianca had gone to see him, but he felt it imperative to speak to the Marquésa. However, he hesitated about stepping into the house. He had no desire to find himself alone with Elena. Besides, his interview with her must be of the briefest. Torre Bianca might return at any moment, and it would be awkward to explain his presence there when a few minutes earlier he had been talking with the Marqués at his house.



"I want to see your mistress for just a second. . . . It would be better if she just leaned out of her bedroom window. . . ."

The half-breed closed the door and Robledo went along the outside balcony past several windows. One of them opened a few moments later, and Elena, her hair hanging loose, and a dressing-gown thrown negligently about her shoulders, but leaving much of her arms and breast exposed, leaned out.

She had got up quickly and appeared startled. Even before Robledo spoke, she asked anxiously :

"Has something happened to Watson? Why are you here at this hour?"

Robledo smiled ironically; then he answered :

"Watson is quite well. My being here at such an hour as this is on some other man's account."

He looked at her with severity, and added slowly :

"Within a few hours' time, two men are going to kill one another. This is a horrible absurdity, which makes it quite impossible for me to sleep to-night. So I have come to say to you, Elena, stop this frightful thing, for heaven's sake!"

As soon as she felt certain that Robledo's business in no wise concerned Watson, Elena replied with little-concealed ill-humour :

"What do you want me to do? They can fight if they choose. That's what men are born for."

Robledo heard these words with a gesture of astonishment. How cruel they sounded!

"Although I am a woman," she continued, "these matters don't alarm me. Federico fought a duel for me when we were first married. Several men in my country risked their lives in duels for me in the hope of making themselves agreeable in this way. I never interfered in any of them."



An expression of contempt passed over her face as she added :

“ Do you really think that I am going to ask these two gentlemen not to risk their precious lives on my account, so that afterwards they can ask me for something in return ? Anyway, if I interfered, each one of them would believe that I was interested in him . . . . and I don't care a snap for either of them. If it were some other man who was concerned, I might grant your request. . . . ”

Robledo raised his head slightly at the phrase “ some other man,” and for a moment saw clearly before him the image of his partner. The expression in Elena's eyes grew gentle.

“ Go to bed and sleep peacefully just as I shall, Robledo. Let those two vain male creatures announce to all they like that they are going to kill one another. Nothing serious will happen, you'll see ! ”

She made a motion as though to draw back into the bedroom, for a crowd of *jejenes* and other insects attracted by her fragrant flesh were beginning to swarm around her shoulders, and she had to ward them off by constant slaps while she spoke.

“ If you see Watson, tell him that I expected him all day. With all this commotion about the duel, I suppose it was impossible for him to get away . . . . Till to-morrow then, and rest easy ! There's no need to worry. . . . ”

She closed the window, pretending a childish fear of the mosquitoes, and Robledo retired, defeated.

At the same hour, Canterac, seated at his work table, was finishing a long letter with these words :

. . . and this is my last request. I hope you will grant it. Good-bye, my sons ! Forgive me ! ”

He folded the sheet of paper and put it in an envelope which he placed methodically in the pocket of his coat hanging near him.



"If luck's against me to-morrow," he thought, "they'll find this letter on my person. Before the duel I'll ask Watson to send it to my family, in case. . . ."

An hour later, his opponent was entering Moreno's lodgings.

The Government employee had returned just a short time before from the meeting with Canterac's seconds Pirovani spoke haltingly, struggling hard to conceal his emotion.

He had just left two letters on Moreno's table, one of them very bulky, with the envelope still unsealed, showing the contents to be a folio of close-written sheets. The Italian had been writing most of the night, trying to condense his affairs into such form as could be jotted down on these sheets. He pointed to the less voluminous of the two letters.

"That is for my daughter," he said gravely. "Send it to her if anything final happens to me. . . ."

Moreno tried to laugh as though he couldn't at all believe in the possibility of a fatality. But he stopped his feigned merriment abruptly when the contractor went on in a still graver voice :

"This thicker envelope contains an authorisation duly made out, by means of which you will be able to collect the money the Government owes me, and other sums at the bank. A man as competent as you ought to find it possible, by means of all that I have prepared for you in this packet, to take over my business. I am also leaving a will, appointing you my daughter's guardian. You are the only man here, Moreno, in whom I place my confidence. Even though now and then you have been more on my enemy's side than mine . . . . but that doesn't matter ! I know that you are honest, and I am entrusting my daughter and my fortune to you—everything I have in the world."

Moreno was so moved by this proof of confidence in him



that he was forced to raise a hand to his eyes. Then he stood up to grasp the Italian's hand, and with broken phrases expressed his intention of fulfilling with the utmost exactitude the obligation laid upon him. He vowed that he would devote himself to the care of his friend's daughter and fortune, if the duel should result fatally for him.

. . . . .  
Sunrise ; a meadow overgrown with fine grass, along the river bank ; at the far end some old willows, their roots half exposed to the air. Slowly dying, they lay across the stream and it seemed as though at any moment they might fall into it.

A gloomy spot at best ; and it was here that Elena's friends had elected to fight their duel. The light, striking horizontally and almost level with the surface of the ground, elongated the shadows of the human figures and the trees, making them seem fantastic and unreal.

Pirovani arrived first, escorted by Moreno and Don Carlos, all of them dressed in black. But the contractor was distinguished from those who accompanied him by his coat, which was new and of a solemn cut. He had received it the preceding week from Buenos Aires. It was the creation of a well-known tailor there of whom he had ordered a complete outfit of clothes similar to those made for the most fastidious millionaires of the capital.

Behind this group came a tall, heavy old man, whose nose was purplish and bulbous, due to excessive use of alcohol through a long and prosperous life. He carried a surgeon's instrument case. This was the doctor whom Rojas had gone to fetch the day before.

A few minutes later, Canterac, Torre Bianca and Watson arrived. The captain and the Marqués wore long frock-coats, less striking than Pirovani's, and black neckties, just as though they were officiating at a funeral. Watson alone wore a dark-coloured business suit.



After ceremoniously saluting his antagonist and the latter's seconds from afar, Canterac began to walk up and down along the river bank pretending to amuse himself watching the birds, which were displaying their customary morning animation, or throwing stones into the current. The contractor did not wish to show a less gallant front ; bent on imitating the captain in everything, he also walked up and down near the willows, and looked at the river. And thus both of them continued promenading up and down, like two automata, each on that part of the bank he had selected.

Torre Bianca, who, because of his experience in such matters, directed the arrangements, began to pace out distances. He asked Watson for the two canes that the latter had foresightedly brought with him, and stuck one into the ground. Then he looked toward the sun with one hand over his eyes in order to discover just how the light struck ; and then once more he measured out twenty paces.

"Twenty," he said, and stuck in the second cane.

Then he went up to the other seconds, drew out a coin, and after a word from Moreno, tossed it into the air. As it fell, the Government employee said to Rojas :

"We have won, Don Carlos. We can choose our ground."

The Marqués, who had brought his pistol case, spread it open on the grass. With elaborate care and deliberation he loaded the weapons, producing the same coin in order to consult chance once again. As the metal disc fell, Moreno leaned over to look at it, and said to the rancher :

"Luck is with us. We can choose the revolver we prefer."

Then Pirovani's seconds went to bring him up to that one of the canes they had chosen. The Marqués and Watson conducted their principal to the spot marked by the second.

Meanwhile, the doctor somewhat confusedly set about



his preparations. It was the first time that he had witnessed a duel. With one knee on the ground, he opened his instrument case and began to unroll bandages, open medicine flasks, and examine the condition of his instruments.

The antagonists stood facing one another, Canterac rigid, his face grave but inexpressive, like a soldier awaiting the word of command. Pirovani's eyes glowed like coals, he looked aggressive, furious. When Moreno came up to him to give him a revolver, he said very low :

"You watch me kill him. I know I'm going to do it . . . ."

But then he forgot his homicidal hopes to add anxiously :

"I wish they would explain clearly to me how much time I can have to take aim. I don't want to make any mistake and be taken for an ignoramus who doesn't understand these affairs."

The two opponents held their pistols aloft, the barrels pointing up. Moreno noticed that Pirovani's coat was unbuttoned, and carefully buttoned it. Then he turned up the Italian's collar so that the white of his shirt could not be seen. Meanwhile Torre Bianca was examining Canterac, who was correctly buttoned up in military fashion, but he too needed to have his coat-collar turned up. Both men before taking their weapons, had removed their hats and given them to the seconds.

Taking a stand between them both, the Marqués took a paper from his pocket and read slowly :

*" . . . Secondly, the director of the duel will clap his hands three times, whereupon the principals are to take aim and fire when they are ready, in the interval between the first and the third hand clap."*

*" Thirdly, if one of the two principals fires after the third hand clap he will be disqualified, and declared an outlaw to the gentleman's code."*

Pirovani, with his pistol held above him, thrust his head forward and looked toward the Marqués so as to hear better,



and he nodded at each word that came from Torre Bianca. Canterac remained impassive, as though listening to something that was perfectly familiar to him.

The Marqués went on reading and finally put away the sheet of paper and addressed both antagonists.

"It is my duty to ask those here present if they are able to come to terms without firing. Is it possible for you gentlemen to settle this difficulty without having recourse to the duel? Does either of you wish to offer excuses to the other?"

Pirovani violently shook his head. "No!" Canterac remained motionless. Not a line of his sombre expression softened.

The Marqués spoke again, removing his hat with mournful solemnity:

"Then Fate is to decide between you, and each of you is to comply with the requirements of the field of honour."

He took a few steps backward, keeping the combatants in full view. Then he raised his hand. Were they ready? Pirovani nodded. His adversary continued motionless.

The Marqués brought his hands to within a few inches of one another indicating that he was ready to give the first handclap. Every motion that he made was so slow that it assumed a tragic solemnity.

The other seconds, at a considerable distance from him, were looking on with ill-dissimulated emotion. Still kneeling near his instrument case, the doctor looking up with wide-open eyes.

The Marqués brought his hands together, slowly uttering: "Fire!" . . . One. . . .

Both men brought their revolvers down simultaneously.

Pirovani, whose sole thought at the moment was that he must not shoot after the third hand-clap, fired at once. His opponent blinked one eye and the muscles of his cheek on the same side contracted slightly, as though he had felt



a projectile brush close by. But he at once recovered his impassivity and went on taking aim.

The Marqués clapped his hands again. "Two!"

When Pirovani saw that he had not wounded his enemy, and that now he stood disarmed before him, there passed over his face like a swift cloud, an expression of pure fear. But it had gone in an instant. Then, looking at Canterac who was still taking aim, he crossed his arms, pointing his now useless revolver at his breast, and as though defying death, presented himself full face to the shot.

Moreno clutched Rojas by the shoulder.

"*Pucha!* . . . . He is going to kill him," he said between his teeth.

Torre Bianca gave the third clap. "Three!" But the instant before Canterac had fired.

There was a general rush in one direction. Only the captain remained motionless, one arm hanging by his side, the still smoking revolver in his left hand.

Pirovani lay stretched on the ground, an inert mass. The men who reached him first saw a thread of blood coming from the top of his head, and running out, a miniature stream, on the grass. Then his head was hidden from view, for everyone was crowding around the fallen body, leaning over to hear what the doctor was saying.

In a few moments the latter looked up, and stammered:

"There's nothing to be done . . . he's dead!"

Seeing that Canterac was approaching to learn what had been the effect of his shot, Torre Bianca went up to him, quickening his steps. His gesture told Canterac what had happened even before he spoke.

His second judged it necessary to get him away from the field, and ordered him to follow. On the other side of the sand dunes a vehicle was waiting. It was the same one that had transported Elena to the garden party.

When this cart deposited them in front of the house that



had once belonged to Pirovani, both men stood hesitant. . . . Torre Bianca could not ask the captain to enter the house of the man he had just shot ; nor did Canterac dare move towards it.

So they were standing, unable to take a decision, when Robledo appeared. He had evidently been prowling about the vicinity to learn some news of the event. When he saw Canterac, he looked questioningly at him.

"And the other . . . ?"

Canterac bowed his head, and the Marqués with a gesture told Robledo what had happened.

All three men stood silent. Finally, the Frenchman said very low :

"My career is ended, my family lost to me. . . . And the most frightful part of it all is that I can feel no hate when I think of that poor man. . . . What is to become of me ?"

Robledo was the only one of the three capable at that moment of coming to a determined decision.

"The first thing you must do, Canterac, is to get away. There'll be a great stir about this affair. We won't be able to hush it up as though it were a fist-fight in the *boliche*. You must get away to the Andes at once. When you get into Chile you can wait there. . . . Everything in this world can be settled somehow . . . perhaps well, perhaps badly, but settled somehow."

The Frenchman, however, had lost his grip for the moment. "What could he do ? He had no money . . . he had spent it all for that mad garden-party. . . . How could he live in Chile ? He knew no one there. . . ."

Robledo took his arm and pulled him gently away from the others.

"The first thing to do is to get away," he repeated. "I'll see that you have what you need to do that. Come !"



Canterac, however, hesitated to obey. He was looking back at Torre Bianca.

"Before I go," he murmured, "I would like to say good-bye to the Marquésa."

Robledo listened with a pitying smile to this plea. Then he took hold of him with paternal superiority.

"Let's not lose time," he said. "Look after yourself, and nobody else. The Marquésa has other things to think about."

And he took Canterac with him to his quarters.

All that day the town seethed with the news of the duel. Indeed, some of the inhabitants treated the occasion as a holiday. In the main street thick groups of men and women gathered, talking, gesticulating, and casting hostile glances at the house that had once been the contractor's. Torre Bianca's name and his wife's were bandied about even more frequently than those of the men who had fought the duel.

Some of the *gauchos* who were friends of Manos Duras passed in and out among the groups. Apparently, the recent event had quite overshadowed the hostility existing between them and the people of the settlement.

In the middle of the afternoon, Manos Duras himself came riding up the main street. He stared with profound interest at the dead man's house. Some of the half-breed girls spoke to him. What did he think of that woman who made the men around her kill one another in cold blood? . . . But the notorious *gaucho* merely shrugged, and, smiling contemptuously, passed on. •

Three of his friends were waiting for him at the *boliche*. They were men who lived the greater part of the year in the foothills of the Andes. Recently they had been paying him a visit at his ranch. Under other circumstances, Don Roque would have been alarmed to learn of this fact. He would have suspected that these pals of the *gaucho's* were pre-



paring some shameless piece of cattle rustling. But at that particular moment the most important persons at the dam were giving the *comisario* far more to worry about than the thieving *gauchos* had ever done.

When Manos Duras stepped into the "Almacén del Gallego," he noticed that there were many more customers there than on other workday afternoons. Everyone was talking about the contractor's death.

"That woman did it all," some one was shouting. "She's to blame for the whole thing, the——!"

Manos Duras bethought him of the afternoon when he had first seen the Marquésa; and the memory was enough to make him look as aggressively at the man who was talking as though the words contained an insult for him.

"If two men chose to fight with bullets for this lady, what have you got to say about it? . . . I'm just as ready as they were to draw a bead on anyone who insults her. . . . Come on now, let's see if there's one of you dares step on my poncho. . . ."

This *gaucho* challenge was received in silence by the *gallego's* patrons. When the talk began again, it was about subjects that Manos Duras could not take exception to.

At nightfall, Torre Bianca, from one of his windows, looked wonderingly at the groups of people in the street. Their number had noticeably increased. Then he noticed that the *comisario*, who had just returned from Fuerte Sarmiento, was going about talking to different people in the crowd, urging them to go home. When he saw the Marqués at the window, the Police Commissioner raised his hat to him.

Men and women turned to stare at Elena's husband. Many of the glances turned in his direction were hostile, but no one dared make any demonstration against him.



Torre Bianca could not conceal his amazement at having so many eyes fastened upon him. Then he took in the fact that there was something very unfriendly in the glances coming his way. Haughtily, but sadly, he closed the window. He did not understand.

A little later, Sebastiana opened the house door and leaned over the railing of the balcony. She was irresistibly attracted by this crowd in which she spied many old friends. But when they saw her, the women who were in the street began to gesticulate and shriek out insults.

Annoyed by such an incomprehensible reception, she replied in the same fashion ; but, crushed finally by the strength of numbers of her enemies, and seeing that several of the men were joining in the attack on her, contributing loud guffaws and vile names, she retired, defeated. Her meditations in the kitchen during the next few hours brought her to an alarming conclusion. Every woman of the region, even though she might formerly have been a friend, would now be against her because she was in the service of the Marquésa.

At about the same time of the day, Watson returned to town. After the morning's tragedy, he had accompanied the seconds and the doctor while they transported the victim's body to a dilapidated ranch house near the river. Then they determined to remove it to Fuerte Sarmiento, since Pirovani was to be buried there, in order to avoid the outbreaks that would be imminent if this ceremony were performed in La Presa.

As he was riding into town, just as he reached the first houses of the settlement he encountered Canterac.

The latter also was on horseback ; and he wore a sombrero and a poncho just like the *gauchos*. From his saddle hung a sack of the kind used by the cow-punchers to carry clothing and various belongings.

As soon as Watson recognised him, he stopped to say



good-bye, for Canterac had all the appearance of one prepared to cross the Patagonian desert.

Canterac, by way of replying to his question, pointed to that part of the horizon where the first stars were beginning to glitter over the invisible Andes. Then he told him that he counted on spending the night at a ranch near Fuerte Sarmiento, and that he would probably be under way again before dawn.

"Good-bye, Watson," he said. "It would have been a good thing for us if that woman had never come here. Strange, in what a different light I see things now. But . . . it's too late. . . ."

For a few seconds he looked hesitatingly at the youth; then, finally, with decision, he said:

"I've earned at least the right to speak through my folly . . . listen to what I am going to say, and don't be offended if I give you advice that you don't ask for. . . . Never let anything come between you and Robledo, boy. . . . There are few souls in this world like his. It's thanks to him that I am getting away. Everything in this outfit belongs to him. . . . Don't trust anyone who speaks ill of him. . . ."

He eyed the boy sadly at these words; and before he rode away, he offered him still another bit of advice

"And don't on any account forget that young lady they call Flor de Rio Negro!" Then he shook Watson by the hand, waved him good-bye, and leaning down, spurred his horse. In a moment he had vanished into the darkness of the new-born night.



## CHAPTER XV

WATSON, as he went on towards the town, felt the prick of a conscience that has lost its accustomed tranquillity.

With remorse he remembered the brief dialogue in Canterac's park, in the course of which he had answered Robledo harshly.

"And for this woman," he thought, "for this woman who coolly sends men to their death, I treated my best friend in such fashion!"

And after Robledo's image came that of Celinda, with unhappy, reproachful eyes. . . .

"Poor Flor de Rio Negro," he thought to himself. "Tomorrow I must go beg her to forgive me . . . if she will listen to me. . . ."

Absorbed in his thoughts, he rode into La Presa, letting his horse pick the way. Suddenly, he noticed that the animal was hesitating, about to stop. Raising his head, Watson saw that he was in front of Elena's house.

The *comisario*, assisted by two of his men, was, with paternal exhortations, gently shoving the last group of curiosity-mongers out of the way.

Don Roque followed them down the street, and Richard was about to ride on when he noticed that one of the windows of the Torre Bianca's house had opened. A woman's hand was beckoning to him. Watson remained indifferent to the summons, and the window swung out wide enough to let Elena appear in the opening. She was dressed in black as though in mourning, but she wore her floating veils with considerable coquetry.



Richard felt that he must at least approach the house sufficiently to offer his greetings. He took off his hat in response to Elena's affectionate signs to him.

"Such a long time since I have seen you, Ricardo! . . . Come in at once. . . ."

But he shook his head, looking at her sternly.

"You do not ask for whom I am in mourning," she went on. "It is for my husband's mother, a dear old lady whom I loved very much. I feel so bad about this loss. . . . And I do so need at this very moment to talk to a friend. . . ."

As she spoke she tried to maintain a sorrowful expression, although at the same time she was employing every gracious word and gesture she knew to persuade him to come in. But Richard persistently shook his head, and said finally :

"I shall come to see you when you are living in some other house, and when your husband is present. I cannot come now."

Coldly he went away without turning around; and Elena's emotions ran the scale from intense surprise to hot anger. Finally, she banged the window shut with a violence that threatened to demolish it.

That night, after supper, Watson offered Robledo his apologies for his unfriendly words to him at the garden *fête*; but Robledo cut him short.

"That's all over and done with, Watson. We're as good friends as before, aren't we? So what does all that matter? The terrible part of this affair is what happened to poor Pirovani . . . and in some ways it's even worse for Canterac. Of course, his words made an impression on you. Poor fellow! He wouldn't take anything more than what was absolutely necessary for his journey over the mountain. He's going to wait for news from me in Chile, he says. I must get some letters of recommendation for him from



friends of mine in Buenos Aires. . . . But what a catastrophe, Watson ! . . . . And all for a woman ! ”

Robledo was silent for a while. Then he added optimistically :

“ She isn’t *bad*, she’s merely a woman of impulse, whose emotions have never had the slightest training ; and so she sows evil, without knowing always what she is doing, because all her attention is centred on herself. She has never discovered that she isn’t the centre of the universe. If she were rich, she would perhaps be good. But she cannot be content with a modest sort of existence, and she’s incapable of sacrificing herself. All the trouble in her life comes from the fact that she has so little and desires so much ! ”

He smiled sadly, and then went on after a pause :

“ Fortunately all women are not like that. She herself told me that in this age of ours, the woman who thinks at all is unhappy and hates all the rest of creation if she can’t have the pearl necklace that is ‘ the modern woman’s uniform ’ . . . . I am quoting. . . . But there is something more terrible still than the woman who is determined to get a pearl necklace for herself, Richard, and that is the woman who, having had it once, has lost it, and feels that she must at any cost get it back ! ”

The memory of *Gualicho*, the demon who tormented the Indians with his wiles, driving them to the point where they mounted their horses and pursued him with darts and tomahawks, passed through his mind. Elena, in the old world, would have been merely one of many dangerous women ; and her powers for evil would have been checked and neutralised by the proximity of others like herself. But here, surrounded by men who admired her, conscious of primitive surroundings among which she stood out like a being of finer clay, she had, without wishing to, exercised an influence as evil as that of the red-skinned demon, in former times the terror of the wandering *gauchos* of the pampas.



She herself had been a victim of the loneliness of her surroundings to the extent at least of becoming enamoured of Watson. She had believed that she could play with men and despise them. That at least was what she had intimated to Robledo one evening while she gazed pityingly at her victims. But Richard was youth and masculine energy incarnate ; he was, moreover, the object of a young girl's first love ; and so to this mature coquette, eager to win him away from an inexperienced adolescent, as a proof that her former powers of seduction had not yet waned, he represented an irresistible temptation. . . . And now her vanity had been cruelly wounded. Not only had the only man she had found interesting in this wild desert repulsed her ; she had every reason to believe that he despised her. . . .

Robledo, meanwhile, went on talking about the Marquésa with a somewhat contemptuous pity.

"She really believes that she was born for higher things, and yet Fate seems determined to make her roll downhill . . . . It isn't surprising that she should appear to be a bad woman, when you consider that she doesn't know what resignation means."

But the effect of Elena's influence on affairs at the dam was sufficiently alarming. . . .

"Our contractor dead . . . our chief engineer a fugitive . . . . How can we carry on the work, Watson ? The construction at the dam will be delayed and the spring floods will come before we have braced the walls. What are we going to do ? I'll have to run up to Buenos Aires to get help."

And he spent most of the night worrying about what was to be done to save three years' labour from destruction.

The next morning Watson got on his horse ; but instead of riding towards the canal works he took the road to the Rojas ranch. There was no use going on with this secondary



part of the work until the Government sent down a new engineer to take over the completing of the work on the dam.

When he reached the ranch, he was about to dismount and open the "palisade," or barrier poles that closed the way. But near it he discovered a small half-breed, about ten years of age, a chubby little fellow with velvety antelope's eyes, and a skin of a lustrous light chocolate colour. The small boy, one finger in his nose, was smiling at him.

"The master went out early this morning," he said in reply to Richard's question. "Last night some one stole one of his cows."

"And where's your mistress, Cachafaz?"

Young Puck, who had earned his name Cachafaz through an unbelievable series of devilries, took his finger out of his nose, and pointed vaguely to the horizon line.

"She just now left. You'll find her somewhere near."

And with his dirty forefinger he gestured in a zigzag towards the distant desert. Watson grasped the fact that for young master Cachafaz "just now" might mean one hour, or two, or three, and "somewhere near" might mean anywhere within two leagues. But he must see Celinda! Determined to find her, he set his horse off at a gallop towards the open, trusting that luck would lead him in the right direction.

But what young Cachafaz had not told the visitor was that, in his estimable mother's opinion, the little mistress of the ranch was sick. Cachafaz's mother was an old Indian woman who had come to take Sebastiana's place as house-keeper; but she lacked some of Sebastiana's virtues; she had neither her good-humour nor her talent for work. All day long she kept a Paraguay cigar in one corner of her blue, nicotine-stained lips, and when Don Carlos wasn't at home, she used his carved calabash and silver *bombilla* for the absorption of her own *mate*.



The servants and *peons* at the ranch looked upon Cachafaz's mother with superstitious respect, for it was generally believed that she was a witch and held dealings with the invisible spirits of the air, those that howl as they whirl inside the sand columns as high as towers, that the hurricanes drive in front of them when they come down from the plateau lands. When the old squaw noticed that Celinda was in very poor spirits indeed and found her crying several times, she shook her head knowingly as though all this merely confirmed her suspicions.

"The trouble with the girl is that she's sick, and I know what sickness she's sick of."

An ancestor of the old woman's had been a great medicine-man back in the times when the Indians were still the owners of the land. He was always summoned whenever the chiefs fell sick. His son had inherited his secret lore, but, unfortunately, he had handed on only a part of it to his daughter, who became Cachafaz's mother.

"It's the *ayacuyas* that are bothering the girl, and she must be cured of the wounds left by their arrows."

The old squaw was well acquainted with the *ayacuyas*, hobgoblins so diminutive that a dozen of them would scarcely cover a finger nail; they always carried bows and arrows, and it was the wounds from these weapons that caused most of the sicknesses in the world.

She herself had never seen them, for she was nothing but a poor, ignorant, miserable old woman, but her father and grandfather before him, who had been great *machis* or medicine-men, had often had dealings with these little creatures. Only the native Indians could see them. Some of the *gringo* doctors pretended to have seen them too, and called them by a name in their own language, *microbe*, but what did they know about them? . . .

And if you took their bows and arrows away from them, they attacked human beings with tooth and nail, and it



was important to know how, by bleeding and sucking, to get the splinters of the arrows, or the nails and teeth that the invisible demons left in the bodies of their victims.

"I'll find you a *machi* who'll make you well, little lady, and take away this sadness that the *ayacuyas* gave you. But don't let the master know of it!"

Celinda smiled at the remedies suggested by Cachafaz's mother. When she grew tired of being shut up in the ranch house, she went to get her horse and rode him hither and thither over the desert with no goal to reach. She never wore boys' clothes now. She hated those clothes because of the memories they awoke. She preferred riding in skirts; and she had laid aside, too, the lasso that had once been her favourite plaything.

That morning she had been galloping for more than an hour over the ranch when she noticed, on a slight elevation, a rider standing motionless; the distance diminished him to the size of a little tin soldier.

She stopped when she noticed that the miniature rider was plunging down the slope and galloping towards her as though he had recognised her. For some time he was lost to sight, then he reappeared, much bigger in size, on the edge of a deep depression. When she saw that the rider was Watson, her first impulse was to flee. But she repented of this impulse as though it were cowardly, and turning her horse about, remained motionless in a disdainful attitude.

Richard rode up to her, and with his hat in his hand and eyes humbly cast down, he was about to beg her pardon. He opened his mouth to speak, but the words would not come. Nor did Celinda give him time.

"What do you want?" she asked harshly. "Has your *gringa* dismissed you? Other people's leavings aren't welcome here."

And she wheeled her horse about to ride away. Richard made a desperate effort.



"Celinda! I've come to tell you I'm sorry. . . . I came to get my Flor de Rio Negro . . . to . . . to——"

She softened a little at the note of childlike humility in the young man's voice; but at once she recovered herself and looked at him unforgivingly.

"Ask alms of God, brother, and go your way.\* To-day I have no alms to give!"

She began to move away; but she stopped long enough to tell him with the cruelty of a spoiled child:

"I don't like men who ask for pardon. Anyway, I vowed that if you wanted to see me again you'd have to catch me with the rope. . . . But you'll never be able to. You're nothing but a tender-foot, and a *gringo*, and you're awkward, and I don't like you."

And, spurring her horse, she went off at a gallop, not, however, before casting Richard a look of utter scorn.

He stood distressed by this dismissal, and felt no desire to follow her. Then his vanity took offence as he went over the words that she had thrown at him. She had belittled him as a man, and he was going to get hold of her and show her that he was no tenderfoot nor as awkward as she made out.

Then began a wild race through the ranch, one rider following the other up hill and down, from ridge to gully. Now and then Celinda, who had a great advantage over her pursuer, would rein in her horse as though she wanted to be overtaken; but as soon as he came near, she started off at a gallop again, insulting him with the terms that the *gauchos* of other days used when they made fun of the awkward Europeans and their lack of skill as riders.

"Clodhopper *gringo*! Tenderfoot who doesn't know one end of a horse from another!"

Richard kept a coil of lariat that Flor de Rio Negro had given him on the front of his saddle. As he rode along he



let it out and began throwing it over her head every time he came near her. But the lasso always fell into space, while Celinda, from far away, laughed at this exhibition. However, her laughter had changed in character, and was growing heartier and happier, as though expressing, not so much contempt for the man she was mocking, as genuine merriment. Watson, too, was laughing; so often, when they had laughed together, they had made up their quarrels!

In their circlings about, they had little by little approached the ranch. Celinda jumped her horse over an obstacle of tree-trunks and rode into the corral. Watson did not dare let his horse take the height and rode around the palisade in order to get in through a gate.

He reached the main building of the ranch with calculated slowness, hoping that some one would come out to whom he could speak. Celinda remained invisible, and he did not dare go up to the front door of the house, for fear the Señorita Rojas might receive him in unfriendly fashion.

Again little Cachafaz appeared quite providentially close to the horse's feet.

"Tell the Señorita Celinda I would like to come in and say 'How do you do' to her!"

Cachafaz went away scratching his little fat chocolate-coloured belly under his loose shirt. In a few minutes he came out of the house and in his soft Indian sing-song he announced to Watson:

"Mistress says you're to go away, and that she doesn't want to see you, because you are . . . because you are very ugly!"

Cachafaz burst out laughing at his own words; but Watson looked despondently at the house. Then he turned his horse about, and, a little consoled by a resolution he had just taken, rode homeward.

"I shall come back to-morrow," he said to himself. "I shall come back every day until she forgives me."



Elena was absorbed in thought, sitting in an arm-chair. Then she took up a position near the window where she could look out on the main street without being seen.

As a matter of fact, she could be seen only by two of the four policemen of La Presa. Don Roque had placed them near the house so that there should be no more gathering in groups around it as on the day before. For the moment the people of the settlement seemed to have forgotten Pirovani's former dwelling. No one seemed at all inclined to stop in front of it, and the *comisario's* precaution seemed superfluous. Besides, many of the workmen from the dam had gone to Fuerte Sarmiento to be present at the contractor's funeral. The others were either in the *gallego's* shop or gathering to talk in different places on the outskirts of the town, where they heatedly discussed the possibility of the immediate suspension of the work, which would leave most of them out of employment.

Some of the more optimistic ones were certain that on the very next train a new chief engineer would arrive, quite as though the Government at Buenos Aires could not go on for a day without starting up the works at the dam again. The Galician and some of the other Spaniards were betting on Don Manuel Robledo as the new director of the works.

Some of the old *peons* who had laboured on all the public works of the country shrugged their shoulders with characteristic fatalism.

"The cart is caught in the mire, and you'll see a long time pass before its wheels revolve again!"

Meanwhile, Elena, standing behind the window, was gazing at the solitary street and mentally reviewing all the difficulties of her present situation. Pirovani dead . . . Canterac a fugitive . . . she no longer even knew who owned the house she was living in. Besides this, Robledo must have been talking about her to the only man whose presence gave emotional interest to the monotony of her life in that



God-forsaken country. Perhaps at that very moment this man, whom she needed, was with that girl who had tried to lash her face with a riding-whip. . . .

Never, in the whole course of her complicated history, the many phases of which she alone knew, had she found herself placed in a situation so difficult. Even that heterogeneous mob, in which there was many a man with a European crime record, dared to criticise her, and went so far as to force the public authorities to set a guard over her . . . there they were, those two men armed with sabres, just within sight of her window ! And she had crossed the ocean and come to live in this wild land only to find herself in this lamentable situation !

She had always found a way out of the difficulties of her life ; she had always discovered a solution. Sometimes it was a bad one, and sometimes profitable . . . but what was the solution of the difficulties that faced her now ? . . . Should she go away ? But how ? She and her husband were as penniless as when they arrived ; more so, since Robledo was not going to pay their fare back. And where could they go, with the law lying in wait for her husband if he should return to Paris ?

She was terrified at the thought of remaining in La Presa. Her life there had been tolerable up to the present, thanks to Pirovani's generosity, and the rivalry she had stirred up among the men of the community. But now that the Italian was dead she would have to give up this house that was palatial compared to the other dwellings of the settlement. No one would come any more to admire her, pay her attentions, and desire her, doing everything to make life agreeable for her. Only Robledo remained . . . and he was an enemy ! And as for Watson, who might have provided the solution she was seeking . . . there was his partner in the way !

An idea that she had been cherishing of late passed through



her mind. When she had been out riding with Watson, it had occurred to her more than once that now was the time to leave Torre Bianca, who was, after all, a failure, who would never succeed in getting ashore from the shipwreck. . . . But with Watson she would be able to make her way in the world. He was young, energetic. . . . With the advice of an experienced woman to guide him through a life of adventure, he would succeed anywhere. In her previous life she had had similar experiences under far less favourable circumstances. . . . But of what use to think about Watson? That solution was denied her. An implacable hate burned in her at the thought.

Richard had gone away for good and all. She could not doubt that, after the words they had exchanged while she stood at her window the day before. . . .

Perhaps it would be easy to win him back if she could only have him alone with her for a while. But, aware of that danger, hadn't he told her bluntly that he would call upon her again only if her husband were present? The tone in which he had spoken and his look at her as he spoke, had shown her clearly enough that he would be immovable on this point.

Ignorant as she could not but be of the young man's conversation with Canterac after the duel, she naturally attributed his change of manner to Celinda's influence.

"She has taken him away from me," the older woman thought. "It is she who stands in my way. . . . How I hate her!"

And while she pursued these reflections, she felt agitated and divided by diverse and opposing thoughts as though she were two distinct persons. The image of Watson comforted her even in these painful moments. He was young, he was the master fated to come along some time in the life of a woman who has played coldly and cruelly with men. In all her previous life she had sought men out of



ambition or vanity. But now she needed Watson ; she needed him not only because he could get her out of the critical situation in which she found herself, but because he was youth and strength and resourcefulness, he was everything she lacked, everything her weary life needed. And as though that were not enough, she felt the pain of jealousy, the jealousy of an impulsive and mature woman who sees her last hope of happiness snatched away by a rival young enough to be her daughter.

And with this torment, there was all the difficulty of the tragic situation created by the rivalry she had excited between two of her admirers ; and there was the urgent necessity of protecting herself against the general hostility that was likely to pursue her throughout the whole community.

“ What am I to do ? ” she kept saying to herself. “ Where shall I go ? ”

A knock at the drawing-room door interrupted her. It was Sebastiana, who came in with a timid, undecided expression, fingering a corner of her apron, and smiling at her mistress as though looking for words in which to explain what had brought her there.

Elena gave her a little encouragement, and finally the half-breed plucked up courage enough to speak.

“ I was in the employ of Don Pirovani, and as he is dead now . . . and for the reason that everybody knows, I must go away.”

The Marquésa signified her surprise at this decision. Sebastiana could remain, of course. She was pleased with her services. The contractor's death was not sufficient reason for her going. As long as she must work somewhere, she might as well work for Elena. But the half-breed was insistent, and went on shaking her head.

“ I must go. If I stay, there are friends of mine here who'll scratch my eyes out. Many thanks ! . . . just the



same, I'd rather stay on good terms with my people . . . . and . . . I might as well say it . . . the Señora Marquesa hasn't any friends here."

At this Elena deemed it prudent not to continue the conversation. So she expressed her acceptance of Sebastiana's decision.

"Very well, if you are afraid to stay here. . . ."

This prudence quite moved Sebastiana.

"I'd like to stay. The Señora is very kind, and never did me any harm. . . . But that's the way people are, and I can't fight all the women in town. . . . But if there's anything I can do for the Señora, she has only to ask. . . . It would be a pleasure. . . ."

Finally, after expatiating further on her desire to be useful to Elena, and her unwillingness to leave her, Sebastiana withdrew.

Near the door, she stopped to reply to Elena's question about the whereabouts of the Marqués.

"I don't know. He went out this morning and hasn't come back yet. Perhaps he went to Fuerte Sarmiento with Don Moreno for the funeral of my poor old master."

When she was once more alone, Elena's thoughts turned to her husband as to some one long forgotten but now presenting himself with renewed importance. She was so accustomed to looking upon him as a person entirely lacking in desires of his own, as some one ready to accept all her notions, and disposed to believe whatever she wanted him to believe! But this latest episode of her life had been of such a violent nature. . . . In a large city it would have caused little more than a ripple. But here, in the monotony of life in a pioneer community, where such unprecedented events were rare, surrounded by this rabble of adventurers, pre-disposed to insult persons of superior rank. . . .

She felt more and more uneasy at the thought of the possibility that Torre Bianca might learn the real cause of



the rivalry between those two men whose duel he had directed. Mentally she reviewed all that had passed between her husband and herself since the previous day. On returning to the house, Federico had told her of the sad outcome of the duel ; but he had obviously taken certain precautions in telling her the news, as though fearful of the emotion it might cause her. But later that day he had appeared a changed man. He would not speak, he answered her questions in monosyllables. And twice she surprised him gazing fixedly at her with an expression that she had never seen him wear before. After having closed the window, to shut out the stares of the crowd that so much annoyed him, he had shut himself up in his bedroom, and had gone away the next morning very early, while Elena was still asleep. All that day she had not seen him. What was she to think ?

But her uneasiness soon left her. She was so accustomed to controlling her husband that she concluded that her suspicions and fears were all uncalled for. Besides, even though her uneasiness should be well founded, she would always be able to calm and reassure him, as she had done so many times before.

The sight of a passer-by slowly walking in front of the house, and looking attentively at the windows, was enough to make her forget all about her husband . . . Manos Duras ! An hour earlier, when, as now, she had stood at the window, she had thought once or twice that she saw the *gaucho* standing at the entrance to an alley that ran into the main street near the house. The notorious cow-puncher was roaming around the town on foot just like a European labourer on a holiday. As soon as he caught sight of the Marquésa on the other side of the window panes, he saluted her, taking off his hat with a flourish and showing his wolf's teeth.

This was the first pleasant greeting that Elena had received since Pirovani's death. She felt instinctively that



this man was the only admirer left her ; that this should be seemed to her so comic that she could not help smiling. Henceforth there was only one suitor for her favour whom she could count on in that part of the world . . . and he was a cattle-rustling *gaucho* !

She stood meditating once more, her forehead pressed against the window-panes, staring at the solitary street. Manos Duras had disappeared in the neighbouring alley-way, and even the two policemen, considering their vigil unnecessary, had wandered off to the *boliche*.

Again three discreet raps on the door. . . . Sebastiana entered more resolutely. This time she spoke very low, and with a confidential expression in her crafty eyes.

"Has the master come in ?" asked Elena.

"No ; it's something else I'm to tell you. . . . I was in the corral a moment ago, and the *gaucho* they call Manos Duras suddenly looked in at the back gate and he said . . . "

Sebastiana made a valiant effort to recall the man's words. He had charged her to tell the Señora Marquésa that he was "at her orders for anything she might chose to command, that in times of trouble one discovers one's true friends, and now that there were so many people both in the town and outside of it, talking evil of the Señora out of pure envy, Manos Duras was glad to have the opportunity to say that he was just the same in his sentiments as before."

" ' Tell your mistress that I don't turn around with every wind like the others, and that she will always be the same for me, for I'm one of those that break but never bend. . . ' That's what he told me to tell the Señora. . . . "

Elena received the words with a smile. Poor man ! And yet there were people who said he was no better than a bandit ! To her at that moment he seemed the most interesting male creature in the region ; he was the only gentleman to offer her assistance.



When the half-breed went out of the room, Elena remained standing near the window, her eyes following the passers-by as they came and went in constantly increasing numbers. Several times she stepped back at sight of groups of workmen on horseback or in carriages returning from Fuerte Sarmiento. 'They must undoubtedly be those who had gone to the contractor's funeral. All of them, she noticed, looked askance at the house before they passed on.

At dusk she saw a solitary rider go by, his head obstinately held down. It was Richard Watson. From his dust-covered clothing, and the lagging pace of his horse, she concluded that he had not been to the funeral. He must have spent the day riding in the open; undoubtedly in the Rojas ranch or wandering near the river with that girl who was so free with her whip. "And I have to stay shut up here like a wild beast to escape the insults of this miserable and unjust rabble . . . and then they wonder that I do the things I do. . . ."

She remained motionless, her eyes closed, while the shadows of twilight crept out of the corners of the room, and came to mingle their darkness in the core of her being. A faint and fading light from outside gave a certain bluish phosphorescence to the window panes, outlining Elena's motionless silhouette.

When night had fallen she called Sebastiana, who answered, saying that she was bringing the light.

And she appeared, bearing a large lamp which she placed on the table in the centre of the parlour.

She was on the point of going away, believing that she had discharged her full duty, when her mistress stopped her.

"Do you know where that Manos Duras you spoke to me about a while ago is now?"

The half-breed, always inclined to chatter, produced a long preamble before giving a definite reply. Manos Duras was going about these days with some friends of his from the



mountains who were staying with him at his ranch . . . they were a poor sort and not at all God-fearing. No telling what they might be up to . . . and he had said, while he was talking at the gate, that he might soon go away on a long trip, and that this was the principal reason why he had come to bother the Señora, in case she should want him to do anything for her.

"And probably," she wound up, "if he hasn't gone back to his ranch, I'll find him this very moment at the *boliche* !"

"Go and find him," said Elena, "and tell him that I want him to be in front of the house at ten o'clock. . . . You needn't say anything else. But be careful how you tell him. . . . I don't care to have any one overhear. . . ."

Sebastiana had some doubts as to whether she had heard the first words correctly, but on being admonished by her mistress to be discreet, she forgot her astonishment and began affirming vehemently that the Señora could rest easy as to her prudence, and that she was accustomed to discharging confidential missions with the utmost care.

She went out of the house and made a bee-line for the *boliche*. If the *gaucho* was not there, it would mean that he had started for his ranch.

When she reached the door of the *gallego's* establishment, she stopped and peered inside. As it was the supper hour the customers were not numerous. The majority of them had gone to their own homes, where they were having their evening meal with their families. An hour later, they would have returned to sit around the counter. An old *gaucho* was strumming the guitar while he gazed up at the paunch of one of the crocodiles hanging from the ceiling. Manos Duras' three guests were listening attentively. Manos Duras himself was sitting on a horse's skull, and leaning one shoulder against the wall, was smoking meditatively. As the owner of the *boliche* was absent, Friterini,



behind the counter, was assuming all the airs of proprietorship, while he blissfully perused an ancient and greasy copy of an Italian magazine.

Manos Duras looked up when he heard a discreet cough, and saw a half-breed in the door beckoning to him to come out. When he had followed her to the rear of the *gallego's* shop, Sebastiana delivered her message in a mysterious manner, keeping one finger on her lips; she even went so far as to wink one eye. The *gaucho* needn't take her for a fool. She had some idea what her message meant!

When the half-breed had gone, Manos Duras waited a few minutes before returning to the *boliche*. He wanted to be alone in the dark, for it seemed to him that he could enjoy his satisfaction better there. But in his satisfaction there was a great deal of astonishment. How could he have foreseen, that afternoon, as he wandered in front of the great Señora's house, that she would send him a message asking him to see her in private that very night?

When, through Sebastiana whom he found in the corral, he had made his offer of assistance to her mistress, he had simply been, in his own special way, obeying a chivalrous impulse. He wanted to appear to the Marquésa's eyes to be a man different from the rest, and he had offered his protection without any hope that she would accept it. . . . Yet one hour later she was sending for him. What was she going to ask him to do for her?

Fortified by male vanity, he dismissed his doubts. Even though he was a rough cattle merchant, he was, after all, a man; and a better one at that than these others. . . . They were all afraid of him. . . . these *gringas* from the other side of the world were capricious creatures. . . . one never knew where their fancy might lead them. . . . Manos Duras smiled. . . .

"Just what I always said," he thought; "they are all alike!"



And he returned to the *boliche* and sat down with his friends waiting for the hour stipulated by the great Señora.

Robledo and Watson were at that moment finishing their supper.

Someone knocked at the door.

They were both astonished to see Torre Bianca come in ; he was so thoroughly covered with dust that his black clothes looked grey, and his hair and moustache were completely white.

" I've just come back from Fuerte Sarmiento, from poor Pirovani's funeral. . . . Moreno brought me back in his carriage."

Robledo invited him to sit down at the table.

" Have some supper here, if you don't feel that you must go at once to your house."

Torre Bianca shook his head.

" I do not intend to go back to my house."

He spoke with such decision that Robledo stared at him. So tense were the nerves of the Marqués that his hands shook and his tongue stumbled over the words he spoke.

" I had something to eat with Moreno before coming back here. . . . But I'll eat a little now. . . . Death . . . it's pretty grim, isn't it ? Poor Pirovani. . . . I'll have a drink, if you don't mind."

In spite of mentioning several times that he was hungry, he ate very little of the food brought him by Robledo's servant. But, on the other hand, he drank a great deal of wine, tossing it down mechanically, as though unaware that he was drinking.

Robledo thought he noticed the odour of gin about him. Undoubtedly, he and Moreno had had several drinks before starting on the journey home. Perhaps this was the explanation of his excitement. He was not in the habit of drinking liquor. "

Watson, who had finished his supper, noticed that Torre



Bianca was looking at him as though he wanted to intimate that his presence was inopportune.

"Is Moreno at his place now?" the young American inquired.

And on hearing that he was, Watson took himself off to discuss with the Government employee the report that was to be presented at Buenos Aires, urging that the work at the dam be continued.

When Torre Bianca found himself alone with his friend, he became a different person. His excitement abated suddenly, he lowered his eyes, and it seemed to Robledo that he was shrinking in his chair like something soft that huddles in on itself for lack of support from within. All the spurious energy of alcohol had vanished at a stroke, and Torre Bianca, sitting opposite him there, had all the appearance of a wrapping from which the contents have been deftly removed.

"I must talk to you," he said, lifting his mild and pleading eyes to his friend. "You are all that is left me now, the only human being in the world who cares anything about me . . . and for that very reason you must let me have the truth. To-day, while they were burying poor Pirovani, I could think of nothing but this. . . . 'I must see Robledo!' He will tell me frankly what I am to think of all this. What I mean by 'all this' is the things I have noticed since yesterday . . . everywhere I go . . . the way people look at me, the dislike they show in their gestures, the names I can hear them calling me in their minds . . . they don't have to speak, because I can guess it all. . . . Oh, it is too horrible!"

His voice broke on a note of complete discouragement and he covered his face with his hands. Robledo murmured a few words intended to cheer him up a little, but the Marqués interrupted him.

"You can talk later, Manuel. But first you must hear



some things you don't know, and some of the things I told you once, and that you have forgotten. I must ask you one thing. Do you believe that my wife is deceiving me ? ”

Robledo looked his astonishment at his friend's words. Several minutes passed before he attempted to reply. It was obvious that Torre Bianca was in terror of his answer. And to avoid hearing it, he began relating the whole story of his relations with Elena.

Robledo had heard a part of this history when he was in Paris—how the Marqués had met her in London, the high rank her family held in Russia at the court of the Czars, and so on. But now the speaker's tone was quite changed, as though Torre Bianca himself had his doubts about the authenticity of that past in which, up to that very day, he had had complete faith, and about which he had always shown a great deal of pride.

Furthermore, between the lines of his narrative, Federico was revealing new episodes to his friend. Apparently, the events of the past stood out in clearer relief now, and his attention was caught by details that until then had passed unnoticed. There had always been in his house an intimate friend, a favoured friend, whom his wife treated with the utmost confidence, asserting that she had known him since the days when she was living with her distinguished family. And when one “ friend ” went away, another appeared. But the place was never vacant. Twice the Marqués had fought duels for his wife's honour, as a result of her being calumniated by men who but a short time before had been frequent visitors in her drawing-room. And with remorse he recalled that his antagonist in one of these duels had been a friend of his whom he had seriously wounded.

“ I have told you the whole story of my life with this woman,” he said. “ At least, all that I am sure of concerning her life. The rest is what she herself says . . . and I don't know whether I am to believe it or not. . . . I even



doubt what she says about her nationality and her name. I told her frankly everything about myself . . . and she gave me back lies . . . lies . . . lies. . . .”

Again he looked anxiously at Robledo, hoping that the latter would give him some faith in what he had once believed.

Like a drowning man, the Marqués was grasping at straws as he sank. But Robledo looked away, and gave an ambiguous shrug.

“Since a few hours ago I have been looking at things with new eyes. Ah, God! The cruel glances of those poor people when I opened the window yesterday! And to-day during the funeral. . . . I can’t tell you what torment I endured! . . . And I who never in my whole life have been afraid of anyone, I couldn’t meet the hostile eyes of those workmen . . . and what was worse, some of them were mocking and contemptuous. Poor Moreno kept taking me aside and talking very loud so that I wouldn’t hear the things people were saying behind me. . . . He didn’t know that I noticed everything he was doing to protect me. . . . But this afternoon I felt so overwhelmed that I thought of you, my friend . . . and I thought of my poor old mother as though I were still a child. She had deprived herself of everything so that her son might preserve the honour of his race! And her son ends up by being the laughing-stock of a workmen’s camp, in a wild, uncivilised corner of the globe. . . . Oh, how shameful!”

He covered his eyes with his hands as if to shut out the cruel spectacle. Then he looked up to ask with breathless anxiety:

“You, who are my only friend, and who knew something of my life in Paris, do you believe that Fontenoy was my wife’s lover?”

Again Robledo made an ambiguous gesture. What



could he reply ? And again Torre Bianca, with anguish in his voice, asked :

“ And those two men who went out yesterday morning to kill one another, do you think it was on Elena’s account ? ”

But this time Robledo did not take refuge in ambiguity. He merely lowered his eyes ; and the Marqués took the silence that followed to mean “ yes ” . . . .

Then, hiding his face again in desperation, he said :

“ And it was I, her husband, who acted as master of the duel in which those two men fought. . . . ”

A long silence. The Marqués laid his head down on his hands, and Robledo watched him, pityingly. Suddenly, Torre Bianca straightened up, and said, slowly rubbing his forehead :

“ I can’t go on here. I am ashamed to meet the eyes of these people. But I can’t go away with her, either. She couldn’t deceive me now . . . and when I look at her, and see how falsely she smiles, I shall kill her. . . . I am certain that I shall kill her ! ”

The moment had come for Robledo to speak.

“ Don’t think about her any more. For the time being you must rest. To-morrow we’ll find a better way of your getting rid of your wife. You’ll stay here to-night. And I’ll plan what we must do to-morrow. She will go away. I don’t know just how ; but she’ll go. And you will stay with me.”

He laid an affectionate hand on Torre Bianca’s shoulder, and his tone was like that of a father. But the Marqués kept his face covered, and he shook his head.

He hated her ! And yet, at the thought of separating from her for ever, he felt a sharp pang, a strange anxiety. . . .



## CHAPTER XVI

**P**RICKED by her feminine curiosity, Sebastiana impatiently awaited the hour of her mistress's *rendezvous*.

She was in the kitchen, in the corral covered over by a wooden shelter. Several times Sebastiana carried her small lamp over to the table where she kept an alarm clock to discover the hour. A little before ten she took off the old shoes she wore, and in her stocking feet crossed the corral keeping close under the balcony of the house.

In this fashion, with noiseless step, she reached the corner of the building nearest the window of Elena's bedroom. Then she sat down on the ground, huddling close to a pillar. In this fashion she could hear without being seen.

In a little while, she made out through the darkness the form of Manos Duras approaching the house. She saw him take off his spurs and hide them in his belt, after which he cautiously went up the wooden outside stairway. Shortly after this, the window of the Señora's bedroom opened and she came with a sign to her visitor that he was to make no noise.

Sebastiana strained her ears to hear, but the window was so far away that it was only with the greatest effort of concentration that she could catch a few fragments of phrases. The words that passed between the speakers were uttered in such low tones that she could not be certain that she heard them correctly. It seemed to her that she caught the names "Celinda" and "Flor de Rio Negro"; but she concluded that her sense of hearing must be playing her a trick.



"What has my former little mistress got to do with the schemes of these people?" she asked herself. "You must be imagining things, Sebastiana!"

Thrusting her head out from the shadow of the pillar, she succeeded in seeing both speakers. Manos Duras was nodding approbation of what the Señora was saying. Then he spoke briefly, emphasising what he had to say with impressive gestures. At a certain point he tried to seize the Marquésa's hand, but she drew back, with a movement that expressed both repugnance and *hauteur*. At once he appeared to repent of his impulsiveness, and in a louder tone, and as though making a promise, she said to him:

"We'll speak of this some other time, when you have fulfilled your part of the contract. You understand what we have agreed upon."

And she took leave of him with a certain coquetry of manner, although she succeeded in keeping out of his reach.

When he saw that the window had closed upon the Señora, the *gaucho* went down the steps. On reaching the street, he stopped and looked back.

"Two instead of one," Sebastiana thought she heard him say. And as he spoke he looked like a hungry wolf licking his chops.

But still Sebastiana doubted having heard what had actually been said, and she retired to her dingy bed in her hut in the corral, somewhat disappointed by the scanty results of her eavesdropping.

The only memory of what she had overheard that claimed her attention to the point of keeping her awake was that of the phrases concerning "Ćelinda" and "Flor de Rio Negro"; but what possible reason could there be for these two people to talk about her *nina*?

Robledo also spent a bad night. Worn out by his conflicting emotions the Marqués had finally accepted his friend's invitation, and his host had put him in the same



room that Torre Bianca had occupied when he and his wife arrived at La Presa.

Twice that night Robledo woke up to find that he was straining to hear the sounds coming from the next room. Muttered words and groans came through the thin walls. . . .

“ Federico, do you want something ? ”

In a weak, humble voice came Torre Bianca’s reply. From the comparative silence that followed it seemed that he was making not altogether unsuccessful attempts to be quiet.

A third time Robledo woke, but this time the bars of his window were outlined against the light sky of early morning. A sharp noise had broken into his slumber, making him start up in bed.

When he came out into the living room, he found Watson leaning down over a chair fastening on his spurs. It was the noise made by this chair falling over a few moments before which had aroused him. When he saw his young partner, Robledo exclaimed cheerfully :

“ Up so early ? . . . And you got in pretty late last night, too. . . . ”

But Watson seemed to be in low spirits ; he offered no explanation beyond saying that as there was no work that day he was going out on a long ride.

When he had gone, Robledo finished dressing, walking up and down in the living room as he did so. Passing by the door of Torre Bianca’s bedroom he felt tempted to open it and go in. He wanted to see his friend. A vague presentiment made him uneasy. .

“ How had poor Federico spent the night ? ” he wondered.

He opened the door and, looking in, uttered an exclamation of astonishment. There was no one in the room. The bed, on which the bed-clothes hung, tossed about in disorder, was empty. Robledo stood for several minutes trying to think out a solution for the mystery. He concluded



that Federico, not being able to sleep, must have gone out to walk as soon as it had grown light.

Instinctively, he looked scrutinisingly about the room. He noticed some sheets of paper on the table, all of them bearing the beginnings of a letter in Torre Bianca's handwriting. He had evidently felt it useless to continue any of them.

Robledo picked one of them up. "Thank you for all you have done . . . but I can't go on." Another one began: "The only woman who ever really loved me was my mother, and she is dead. If only I could feel sure of seeing her again!"

Robledo looked at some of the other sheets. They contained nothing but crossed out and unintelligible phrases. Torre Bianca had done his best to write and had finally given it up. Robledo could see his friend in the late hours of the night throwing down his pen . . . he had just picked it up off the floor . . . and saying with the scorn of one who already considers himself above earthly cares: "What does it matter?"

He stood with the papers in his hand, trying to determine what he had best do. Then it occurred to him that perhaps the Marqués was wandering about up at the dam. These scrawls of his gave evidence of indecision . . . at such a time wouldn't he be likely to go to the place where he had been happiest in La Presa, to the scene of his work?

He examined the ground outside the house carefully, and gave an exclamation of satisfaction at distinguishing among the fresh tracks of Watson's horse, a man's footprints. They must be Torre Bianca's.

The tracks led down an alley between his house and the neighbouring one, and then came out on the open. Once outside the town, he lost the traces of the footprints among the many tracks made by those who had passed in and out of the settlement that morning.



Instinctively, he went towards the river, and took an upstream course along the bank. The surface of the water he watched so intently was not broken by the slightest object. Finally he stopped this search of his that had no guide nor reason other than presentiment.

"This Federico," he said to himself, "has upset me with his trouble. Why should I have such absurd fears about him? . . . Let's go home. . . . I feel sure that I'll find him at the house. He's probably been taking a walk on the other side of town."

And with a hurried, anxious step he went back to La Presa.

At the very same hour of the day, near the Rojas ranch, Manos Duras, with his three comrades from the mountains, was talking in the shade of some *matorrales* that grew a little higher than their heads.

They had dismounted and were holding their horses by their bridles. One of them was dressed in different style from his companions, and seemed more like a labourer from a neighbouring town than one of the *gauchos* of the country. To this fellow Manos Duras was giving directions which he accepted in silence, with a few rapid blinks of approval. He then mounted his horse and the other two looked after him until he disappeared behind some *matorrales*.

"The old dog is going to learn what it costs to give me any of his threats," growled Manos Duras with a smile full of venom.

One of the mountaineers, whom the others called Piola, and who seemed to be older than the rest, and better mannered, shook his head and looked dubious. His comrade's plan was all right except for Manos Duras' intention of staying in town a day or two after striking his blow. It would be much better, in his opinion, to retreat together and at once into the mountains.



"Leave the plans alone, brother. I know what I'm doing," Manos Duras replied. "I want to collect something that will be due to me. Perhaps I can get my pay this very night, and if so I'll overtake you by to-morrow."

His horse, an excellent animal, would surely be able to make up for the disadvantage of a late start, and would overtake the first party that was to carry the baggage before they had covered the distance to the ranch.

Meanwhile, his messenger was galloping toward the Rojas property. At the palisade, he opened the gate, and continued his rapid pace through the estate of Don Carlos Rojas.

When he drew near the main building, Cachafaz, made aware of his arrival by the barking of the dogs as they leapt in front of the horse's hoofs and snapped at the horseman's legs, came out to meet him. With sharp cries the boy called off the dogs and then listened with the gravity of a grown man to what the *gaucho* had to say.

But scarcely was the message delivered when Cachafaz, with shouts of joy, rushed into the ranch house, quite unmindful of the messenger.

Don Carlos was in the parlour having his tenth gourdful of *mate* that morning. Celinda, in feminine attire, sat in a cane arm-chair, absorbed, apparently, by her own melancholy thoughts.

"Master," cried the little half-breed, bursting in like a small whirlwind, "the *comisario* has just sent word that you are to go at once to the *pueblo*. They have caught the thief who stole our cow!"

Pleased by this news, the rancher followed Cachafaz out of the room, taking with him his calabashful of *mate* and continuing to sip it through the *bombilla* as he walked. He wanted to learn some of the details of this capture from the messenger who had come in such hot haste to inform him of it.



But, on stepping outside his front door, he was perplexed at discovering that the horseman had disappeared. Cachafaz ran shouting around the buildings and through the various corrals without being able to discover the messenger. Finally, with a shrug, Don Rojas concluded that the *comisario* must have charged some *gaucho* who was riding through that section of the country to deliver the message as he went by. After all, it was good news! The fellow probably had a long journey to make and hadn't wanted to lose any time. Nor should he lose any, either. Thereupon, Don Carlos mounted his horse to go see the commissioner. He would be back for the mid-day meal, he told Celinda.

Manos Duras and his three companions, lying flat on the ground, saw the rancher go by in the direction of La Presa. Keeping their faces close to the *matorral* roots, they laughed cynically as they watched him ride away.

"He's going after the cow we ate yesterday," commented Piola.

And Manos Duras added, with characteristic impudence :

"We'll see what he has to say when we have carried off his little heifer."

Watson, who was riding in the vicinity of the ranch, eager to approach it, and yet fearful of arousing Celinda's resentment by his presence, also saw Don Rojas pass by, going in the direction of La Presa.

This strengthened his courage. Celinda, then, was alone at the ranch, and he could invent some pretext for going to see her. . . . But then he lost heart again. . . . He couldn't stand having Cachafaz come out as on the day before and tell him that Celinda would not see him. No, he preferred roaming about over the plains . . . and perhaps Celinda, bored by her solitude, would come out and get on her horse. . . .

He felt disposed to wait at least until sundown. As was his habit, he carried a few eatables in one of his saddle-bags



But for the time being he had quite forgotten that human beings are born with the mortal infirmity of hunger. Other matters seemed far more important to him at the moment.

Meanwhile, his friend Robledo was wandering along the main street of La Presa, head down, absorbed in his reflections. He had just turned in at his house, but Torre Bianca was still not there. His breakfast had waited for him in vain. Where could he be?

He heard some one calling to him from the middle of the street and looked up. The rancher, Rojas, was talking excitedly to the *comisario*, who looked amazed, then bewildered. Robledo walked towards them.

"Some one came to my ranch this morning to tell me that the *comisario* wanted to see me and return the cow that was stolen from me three days ago. . . . And now Don Roque says he never sent any such message, and doesn't know anything about this business. Did you ever hear the like? Who could the fellow be who brought the message? . . . I'd like to show him what I think of his joke!"

Robledo listened abstractedly for a few minutes, trying to feign a decent amount of interest. Then he went on his way through the town. For the moment, he was entirely preoccupied with thoughts of his friend. Every time he saw a man in the distance he thought it must be Torre Bianca.

"It's too bad that Watson went away so early this morning," he thought. "If he were here, he would help me to look for Federico."

But Watson, far away on the desert, torn between his desire to see Celinda and his fear of being harshly dismissed by her, was little by little approaching the ranch as he rode around it in wide circles. When, however, he reached the palisades of the Rojas property, he was again torn by indecision. How was he to explain his presence on the



ranch grounds when Flor de Rio Negro had ordered him never to come there again?

But the sight of a gate swinging wide open gave him courage.

"No matter what she may say, I'm going in," he decided. "I must see her, even though nothing comes of it but her calling me names. . . ."

And he rode slowly forward down the trail leading to the ranch house. Suddenly, his horse started and quickened his walk, then stopped abruptly as though about to rear.

Across the path lay the bodies of two dogs, recently killed, it seemed, for their mangled heads lay in two fresh rivulets of blood. A few paces farther on, he found a man also stretched across the trail.

He, too, was dead. Richard recognised him as one of Don Carlos' half-breed *peons*, although his head was frightfully shattered by the explosion of the bullets at close range. One of the corpse's eye-sockets was completely empty, and through this opening to the skull was oozing some of the brain. The thirsty earth was avidly drinking up the murdered man's blood.

Watson flung himself down from his horse, and holding his revolver in his right hand, he made his way toward the house. When, on looking through the door opening into the living-room he saw no one, he began to call.

The wicker chair in which Celinda usually sat lay overturned on the floor. The cover of the large table had apparently been roughly pulled off and lay on the ground, while the papers and small objects that usually covered it were scattered about under foot.

He continued shouting, "Where are you? . . . It's me, Watson!" until steps became audible in the hall leading to the inner rooms of the ranch house; and finally there appeared in the doorway the wrinkled, copper-coloured face of Cachafaz's mother. Then the other servants, all



of them half-breeds, also crept out of their hiding-places ; but, to Watson's questions, they stammered unintelligible replies or else maintained terrified silence.

Richard came out of the house just in time to see young Cachafaz peer anxiously out from one of the corrals ; and no sooner did the others see the boy than they all began giving their account of what had taken place ; but the little fellow spoke with a certain authoritative air of knowing what he was about, and Watson listened attentively.

He, Cachafaz, had been with his young mistress that morning and had seen everything ! Three men had come galloping towards the house, full speed. Then the dogs began to bark, and just as he stepped out of the house to run and see what was the matter with them, he heard the shots that killed the poor hounds. Then he saw a *peon* running towards the horsemen, probably to ask them why they were coming into the ranch in that fashion ; but before he could say a word they drew their revolvers and shot him down.

"I ran through the house," continued Cachafaz, breathlessly. "The Señorita was just going out to see what was happening when three men rushed in and threw a poncho over her head ; then they picked her up and carried her away. . . . I was under the table . . . but as soon as they had gone I crept out and I saw them get on their horses, carrying my mistress this way in their arms . . . so . . . under their ponchos. That's all I know."

Then the others burst out once more, each eager to tell what he or she had witnessed, though, as a matter of fact, none of them had seen much, for they had all run to cover as soon as they saw the *peon* drop dead, and had remained in their hiding-places until Watson had arrived. Watson, meanwhile, as he tried to get some clear impression from all these divergent accounts of what had actually taken place, thought remorsefully of those moments of indecision when



he had been wandering outside the boundary lines of the ranch. If he had only arrived half an hour earlier, if he had only been with Celinda, to defend her, to drive off these kidnappers. . . .

He divined from the look in Cachafaz's antelope eyes that the boy did, as a matter of fact, know more than he had said, so he led the small half-breed, who was smiling scornfully at the contradictory statements being poured out by the excited servants, into the next room. There Cachafaz, standing on tiptoe, whispered to him :

" It was Manos Duras . . . and I know where he took our Señorita ! "

Richard fired rapid questions at him, and the boy explained as best he could. No, neither of the three men who had carried away Celinda was Manos Duras. But when Cachafaz left his first hiding-place, which was under the table, he had run into a corral near-by where there was a heap of alfalfa drying for the winter feed of the cows. He had crept to the top of it, and from there he could see far into the distance. So he had seen how the three riders met a fourth who was waiting for them at a distance away, and that fourth was undoubtedly Manos Duras. Then all four started off in the same direction, riding hard, and carrying Celinda with them swung across one of the saddles, a prisoner. . . .

And from the top of his alfalfa heap he had seen Watson coming, but he had been so scared that he hadn't come down until he was quite sure that it was the *patroncita's* friend and no one else.

Watson could not for several minutes co-ordinate his thoughts. It seemed to him that the first thing he must do was to find Celinda and free her at once, without a thought for the advantage of numbers on the side of the bandits. He had one ally at least, young Cachafaz, who knew where Celinda was being concealed. That was the



important thing ; knowing that, everything else should be easy. He'd fight the ruffians and bring Celinda back, of course. And with the absurd self-confidence of lovers, who are incapable of perceiving the actual size of the obstacles placed in their way, he mounted his horse and beckoned to Cachafaz to come with him.

With a flying leap, Cachafaz landed on the horse's cruppers, and clutched Watson's shirt ; then the latter spurred his mount, and they started off at a gallop.

As soon as they had passed through the gate, Richard turned his horse in the direction of the Manos Duras' ranch, which he had often seen from a distance. But Cachafaz exclaimed :

"That's the wrong direction !" and he pointed to the highest part of the bluffs overhanging the river.

"Go over there," he whispered, "to the ranch of the Dead Squaw."

The tumble-down ranch-house, known as that of the "Dead Squaw," had a certain notoriety in the vicinity ; it was rarely visited, for it was generally reputed to be the usual stopping-place of travellers wanting to cross that part of the country without being seen.

"We'll find them there," said Cachafaz, "if they haven't gone on to some other place."

At the same hour, on returning to his house after a fruitless search, Robledo experienced a surprise no less disagreeable than fell to Watson's share when he arrived at the Rojas ranch.

On the threshold of the front door sat Sebastiana, apparently waiting for him, to judge from her grunt of satisfaction at sight of him. He, too, felt relieved to see her, for it flashed through his mind that doubtless Torre Bianca had sent her, with a message explaining his disappearance. Probably the poor, weak-willed Marqués had gone back to his wife and was once more lending his credulity to her lies.



"Did your master send you? . . . Have you a note from him for me?"

Sebastiana blinked her slant eyes by way of showing her astonishment.

"Master? . . . . *El Marqués?* . . ." I know nothing about him. I thought he was here. No, I came for something quite different."

She got up heavily, sighing as she lifted her weight up to a vertical position; then she said, in a hoarse whisper:

"I couldn't sleep all night, and here I am waiting for you to answer a question for me, Don Robledo."

The engineer listened somewhat ironically, though with admirable patience, to this plea for a consultation. But no sooner did the half-breed begin talking than his expression completely changed, and indicated the closest attention to what she was saying.

The woman finished her account of what she had seen and heard the night before.

"Why did the Señorita and Manos Duras talk so much about my little mistress? . . . What has my little white dove to do with them? . . . . As I'm nothing but an old fool who can't understand anything, I said to myself, 'I'm going to see Don Manuel, who knows everything. He can tell me.' . . ."

But Robledo was not listening now. He seemed absorbed. Suddenly he made a gesture as though he had just discovered a terrible truth. Abruptly he turned his back on Sebastiana, and went rapidly back to the place he had just come from.

Then, to the half-breed's astonishment, the engineer began running, with increasing speed, as though her words had made him fearful of arriving too late. While he was still a distance away from the other men, he began to shout and gesticulate to Don Carlos and the *comisario*, who were still talking just where he had left them a few minutes



earlier. Uncomprehendingly they looked at one another when they heard him say, pantingly :

“ Get on your horses . . . at once ! That story about the cow was a *ruse* of Manos Duras to get you away from the ranch. I’m afraid something has happened to Celinda . . . we must get out there as soon as possible . . . if it isn’t already too late. . . .”

Don Roque, recovering from his momentary stupefaction, rushed to his house to get out his gun and mount his horse. His four policemen, whom he summoned at once, rushed about in an attempt to follow their leader’s moves, but only three of them succeeded in finding mounts and borrowing a few guns from the neighbours. Obviously, their sabres would be more useless than ever on this occasion !

Meanwhile, Robledo had gone back to his house, and while the servant was saddling his horse, he strapped on his revolver holster and a cartridge belt, and sent for all the overseers of the works who lived at hand and had guns. In addition, he borrowed the *gallego’s* American rifle, which the proprietor of the *boliche* kept hidden under his counter. Besides carrying on his own preparations, Robledo kept an eye on Don Carlos for fear he might escape. He had obliged Celinda’s father to come back to the house with him, and now he was urging him to be prudent.

“ Getting there half an hour sooner isn’t going to change what has already happened. All you’ll do is to let the bandits get you too into their clutches . . . if nothing worse. We’ll all go together . . . just be patient a few minutes longer ! ”

But the rancher received these admonitions with grunts of protest, trembling all the while with rage and anxiety. Robledo, standing on guard in his doorway, stepped forward to greet the men he had sent for and explain to them what he wanted of them. The *gallego* came up to the group, his American rifle in his hand, and, with a solemnity



befitting the handing over of his entire family, entrusted it to Robledo, his fellow-countryman.

This offered just the opportunity Don Carlos had been waiting for. Jumping into the saddle, he galloped off without paying the slightest attention to the shouts sent after him.

The rescuing party was hastily organised. It consisted of a dozen horsemen, all of them carrying rifles, and under the leadership of Robledo and Don Roque they speedily galloped off.

The news, meanwhile, had spread through the town, and a group of women and children gathered to speed the troop of horsemen with shrill shouts. As they passed the house of the unfortunate Pirovani, Robledo could not restrain his uneasy impulse to glance up at the windows.

"This woman has perhaps prepared another tragedy for us," he thought. . . .

At that instant Watson was dismounting, and, with Cachafaz at his heels, was crawling through the tough *matorrales*. The little half-breed had directed him to a sand-hill on the edge of the plateau; and from this elevation he and his small guide could look down almost perpendicularly on the ruins of Dead Squaw ranch.

Watson knew the place by name. Twenty years earlier it had been inhabited by ranchers who sent their cattle out to pasture in the lands adjoining. But the capricious hurricanes of the desert had suddenly spread a thick mantle of sand over these pasture lands; then the waters of the well, which up till then had been relatively fresh, turned brackish, and finally became liquid salt. All the human inhabitants had fled, and the *adobe* buildings soon fell into ruins. Only vagabonds now sought the shelter of the crumbling roof of the abandoned ranch.

As Watson advanced, cat-like, through the thick, tough shrub-growths of the sand-hill, he felt an eerie fear at the



stillness of the ranch below. Not a dog barked . . . surely Cachafaz must have made a mistake in his deductions, surely that silent ranch was as deserted now as it had ever been ! But the little half-breed, wriggling ahead of him, stopped between two *mattoral* trunks and made a sign to Watson that he was to come nearer.

Thrusting his head between the branches, Richard made out a sandy elevation twenty yards below in the centre of which was the ranch house. Two horses were nosing along together, nibbling at the sparse grass ; and a man with a rifle laid across his knees sat on the ground keeping watch.

Cachafaz murmured into his ear :

“ That’s one of the men who carried away the *patroncita*.”

However much Watson might peer and stretch his neck to see, he could discover no one else below. Making his way backwards from his observatory, he slid down to the bottom of the hill and took out a pencil and bit of paper from his pocket. His bright, animal eyes shining, as though he already knew what the mission was that he was to be entrusted with, Cachafaz watched Watson write.

Richard gave him the paper and pointed to the place where his horse was tethered.

“ Get to the town as fast as you can and give this to the Señor Robledo, or else to the *comisario* . . . whichever one you meet first.”

And he was about to add further directions, but Cachafaz was no longer listening. He was already flying down the hill ; then with a jump he sprang on the horse, and was off at a fast gallop.

Once more Watson went up the sand slope to observe what was going on at the ranch. Then he saw two men ; first the one he had seen before, who was still sitting on the ground with his rifle on his knees ; and another one standing in front of him, carrying no other weapons but the knife



and revolver in his belt. This was a *gaucho* whom he recognised immediately, Manos Duras. The two men were talking, but the distance separating him from them was too great to permit of his catching any words. So it was useless for the moment to continue his observation of the camp; useless also to think of attacking. . . . Not even with the advantage to be gained by surprising them could he take the risk. Although there were only two men visible, it was reasonable to suppose that inside the ranch house there were several more, perhaps asleep.

"What have they done with Celinda?" thought the youth.

Crawling along between the *matorrales*, he followed the edge of the sand-hill until he reached a place opposite the one from which he had made his first inspection. The two bandits went on talking without giving evidence of the slightest suspicion that, on the edge of the slope near them, a man was gliding through the brush, spying on them.

The man facing Manos Duras was the so-called Piola. He was speaking in a tone of vigorous expostulation.

"You know very well that I don't have any use for this kind of business. I steer clear of any mix-up with women in it. It always ends up wrong, and there's the devil and all hell to pay. It would have been a much better job, as long as you were picking one out, to have rustled a herd in Limay and sold it in the *Cordillera* . . . or why the devil didn't you pick on some of old man Rojas' cows that we might have sold for good money instead of making us waste our time here like a lot of kids stealing this little she-calf. . . ."

Manos Duras' only reply was a gesture indicating that what he chose to do was his business. Piola took up his complaint again.

"It may be that you know what you are doing. And we fellows are sticking to you like brothers. But if you got any coin for kidnapping this girl, the least you could do is to share it with us."



The *gaucho* looked at him with scornful anger.

"Money—nothing! Haven't I told you, man, that this is a matter of getting even? . . . Old Rojas insulted me, and I'm doing the worst thing to him that I can think of . . . anyway, you know what our bargain was. . . . You are to keep her for me, and as soon as we get into the mountains, it will be your turn. . . ."

Piola showed his fangs in a smile of appreciation at this part of the contract.

"All right," he said. "We'll keep her for you . . . your turn first . . . that is, if you catch up with us by tomorrow. But if you're late, you won't find her quite as you left her. . . . But why don't you start out with us now? What's up in La Presa to-night that you can't go along with us?"

"Just a little matter to settle," said Manos Duras with an insolent smile. "I want to leave all my accounts in order before I go."

But Piola was far from sharing his comrade's assurance that the adventure in hand would end successfully. He calculated that perhaps at that very moment it was already known at La Presa what had happened at the Rojas ranch. If news of the kidnapping had not yet reached the town, it would be sure to do so before long, for Don Carlos would be returning to his ranch after his fruitless trip to see the *comisario*. Wasn't Manos Duras afraid, he enquired, that the inhabitants of La Presa would attribute the girl's disappearance to him?

"Maybe," replied the *gaucho*, in a tone of contemptuous indifference. "But they have attributed so many things to me without being able to prove any of them! . . . If they see me in town, they'll think that I haven't had anything to do with this affair. Nobody saw me at the Rojas place. Besides, I shall go to my ranch first in case anyone should come up there to look for me. Then this afternoon I'll



ride into town as usual . . . by midnight I'll have finished my business and be on my way to join you."

Piola winked his left eye and pointed towards the ranch house.

"What does *she* say?"

"She thinks we carried her off to get ransom money out of the old man. . . . She has no idea of what's in store for her. . . . Pretty enough, too, and she doesn't seem to be much scared now that she's got over her first fright. *Pucha!* She kept me busy for a while. . . . Little devil, kicking and biting under the poncho when I put her on the saddle in front of me! I'm keeping her with her hands bound in the house yonder. If I didn't she'd be fighting to get out, and you'd have to knock her down as though she were a man!"

Manos Duras stood silent, absorbed by his thoughts for a few moments. Then he added with a cynical smile:

"I came out because it was getting pretty difficult to keep my hands off her . . . but the fact is, brother, there's another one who's even more to my taste . . . and I'm going to see her soon. Just the same, this one is a pretty fine specimen, and when a man's alone with her, the devil begins looking around for his innings . . . and as we're in enemy country, I've no business to forget what I'm doing, and lose time. . . . But I'll make up for fasting to-day by feasting to-morrow. To-day I have another game to finish. So, just as soon as the others get back, I'll be off. You'll go ahead with the she-calf, and I'll go back to the ranch . . . and it'll be 'so long' until to-morrow . . . *si Dios quiere!*"

Watson grew weary of wriggling about through the *matorral* bushes when he found that there was nothing more to see than the two bandits talking together, and the crumbling ranch-house, its door tight-closed, a few planks of wood carelessly nailed across it. No, there seemed to be



no other living being around, and after a while he began to doubt that Celinda's captors had hidden her in the building opposite him. Perhaps they had carried her off to a place much harder to find, and had left her there under guard of the other two men?

Finally, tired of the uselessness of his observation, he slid down the sand-hill and sat near the spot where Cachafaz had jumped on to his horse. Time passed, but so slowly, it seemed a lifetime that he had been waiting there, helplessly, in the slow torture of anxiety and inactivity.

Something was moving on the horizon. . . . His eyes, which had for so long scanned the landscape without discovering anything new in it, suddenly grew animated as he made out between the dark patches of the distant *matorrales* a small rider who grew larger as he steadily galloped towards the sand-hill. In a few minutes Watson recognized him. He had seen the same horse and rider pass by that very morning . . . Don Carlos Rojas.

Although the rancher was coming straight towards him, Richard thought it prudent to go to meet him, and began running, with all the speed he could make in the soft sand furrowed by the black roots of the brush from around which the wind had scattered the supporting soil so that his feet kept catching in the exposed root fibres, and his progress was constantly being interrupted by violent stumblings.

As soon as Don Carlos caught sight of him, he reined in his horse and pulled his revolver from the holster. Then, recognizing him, the rancher dismounted.

Watson was perplexed. He had sent his message to La Presa. How was it Don Carlos had come in response to it . . . and alone?

"Where are the others?" asked Watson. "Have you seen Robledo?"

Don Carlos replied evasively. Perhaps Robledo and the



*comisario* would get there soon, but then again they might take hours. . . .

"And I wasn't going to wait for them," Don Carlos wound up. "A lot of slow-coaches! No knowing when they'll get here. I got tired waiting and so I came alone."

Then he went on to explain that while he was riding as fast as he could towards Manos Duras' ranch, without stopping to go back to his own, he had seen a rider coming rapidly towards him. He had drawn his revolver in order to stop him, but there was something about the rider's appearance that made him determine not to shoot.

"He looked like a monkey on a horse. Cachafaz, it was! Then he told me that you were here and showed me your note. I told him to ride ahead and tell the others so that they shouldn't lose more time going to my place. So he'll show them the way out here. . . . But what has happened?"

They walked along among the *matorral* roots following the path made by Watson, Rojas leading his horse. He tethered it at the bottom of the sand-hill, and then, on hands and knees, followed Watson up the slope from the top of which they could look down on Dead Squaw ranch.

As they peered through the openings in the bushes, they saw Piola still sitting on the ground, just as before, but he was alone. Manos Duras had disappeared.

The fellow was smoking, and looking about uneasily, as though instinctively, with the sharp senses of the desert-dweller, he had become aware of the hidden enemy. Every now and then he stretched his neck and stared into the distance as though expecting a new arrival.

"Let's attack!" whispered Don Carlos.

It apparently was a small matter to him that the mountaineer held his gun in front of him ready to aim.● Rojas and Watson had no arms but their revolvers.



"Don't forget there's another one somewhere about," said Watson.

"Well, what of it? . . . That makes two, and there are two of us. Let's go for them. I want to take a crack at that fellow!"

And he pulled out his revolver, apparently with the idea of firing from where he was, without taking any account of the distance the bullet would have to travel. Watson checked him, laying a hand on his arm, and whispering in his ear:

"There are two other men that I haven't located yet. We'd better wait for Robledo and the rest."

They waited in a state of painful indecision, fluctuating between the determination to wait prudently and the impulse to try their luck and attack without knowing the exact number of the enemy to be reckoned with.

But it was not long before Watson discovered the whereabouts of Manos Duras' other companions. Suddenly, the silence was broken by the furious barking of dogs in the distance. Piola stood up with a shout. Manos Duras came out of the ranch house and went round the corner of the *adobe* building, remaining in full sight of the two men spying upon him from among the *matorral* bushes.

Two other mountaineers were arriving. After the morning's work, they had gone to Manos Duras' ranch to get the troop of horses that were to accompany them on their journey into the mountains, carrying the food and the other supplies necessary for so long an expedition, and the dogs of the ranch had come along with the party.

In a few minutes the two new arrivals, armed with rifles and bringing six horses with sacks and roped bundles, reached the sandy elevation. The dogs, after leaping about among the decaying buildings, joyfully greeting the master they could not see, began to bark uneasily and nose anxiously about. Then they broke into shrill, fierce howls. Their mouths dripping, their backs bristling, they tried to spring



up the sand slope, sliding back and running to the *gauchos* to warn them of the hidden enemy.

Instead of trying to quiet the dogs, the two horsemen looked up threateningly at the *matorrales* of the sandy elevation.

"They've spotted us!" muttered Rojas. "All the better. We'll get through this business right away!"

Watson followed him down the side of the hill. There was nothing to do now but break cover. They came out at the point where the horse was tethered; Don Carlos mounted it and felt his revolver to see if it came out of the holster easily. Keeping close to the horse, Watson moved forward with Rojas, and in this fashion they advanced quite openly towards the ranch house.

When, preceded by the three dogs, which, as they retreated, showed their fangs and barked furiously, they reached the open space in front of the buildings, they found themselves face to face with the two mountaineers still on their horses, and Piola, with his rifle in position, ready to fire. Don Carlos addressed him as though he were the leader of the band.

"Where is my daughter?" he demanded.

Imperturbably the *gaucho* listened to him, as though not understanding a word.

"There's no need of useless talk," Rojas continued. "If it's money you want, out with it, and perhaps we can come to an understanding."

Piola remained silent. Meanwhile, in response to an almost imperceptible signal from him, the other two *gauchos* removed themselves to a distance of a few yards, where they stood scanning the horizon line. One of them rode back, dismounted, and began talking very low to Piola. There was no one to be seen on the plain.

But the dogs continued barking, moving uneasily from one side of the group to the other. It seemed that their



agitation must be a remnant of their previous excitement. The two riders had unquestionably arrived alone.

Rojas continued his attempts to strike a bargain, at the same time making extraordinary efforts to control his indignation.

"But I don't know what you're talking about, Señor," Piola replied finally. "You're on the wrong track. I never saw the young woman."

"Aren't you people friends of Manos Duras?"

While this was going on Watson moved away from the speakers with the intention of getting around the ranch house to the front door. But the other mountaineer, guessing his intention, stepped in front of him, taking aim at him, on the point of shooting. Finally, without having committed himself to any definite reply, Piola turned his back on Rojas and walked away, disappearing behind the corner of the building.

The rancher attempted to follow him and brought up short against the man who checked Watson. His rifle in position, he kept it pointed at both men, and they were constrained to stand motionless while they inwardly debated the question as to whether to yield to the menace of the gun muzzle, or throw themselves upon the bandit.

With a blow, Piola knocked down the poorly-joined planks with which the door was patched, and came upon Manos Duras just at the moment when the latter had reached the conclusion that his struggles with Celinda were going to cost him too many scratches. The girl, in spite of the fact that her hands were still bound, was defending herself with the ferocity of a small tiger against the *gaucho's* attacks. She had torn his flesh with her nails, bitten and kicked him. His face in several places dripped blood, but such was his state of excitement that he was unaware of more than a few of his wounds.

At sight of his comrade he tried to regain something of



his customary composure, and addressed him with fierce joviality.

"What did I tell you, brother? A fellow begins by playing, and before he knows it he loses his head, with a girl like that. . . ."

But he became silent when he saw how Piola was looking at him.

"So, you're playing in here, like a green schoolboy! It doesn't matter to you what happens outside, does it?"

He motioned his leader towards the door, and once on the other side of the threshold, he went on in a low tone:

"Old man Rojas is here with one of the *gringos* from the dam. What are we going to do?"

Manos Duras, in spite of his customary cynicism, was taken aback at the news that only a few crumbling *adobe* walls separated him from Celinda's father. How had he arrived there so soon? Who could have revealed to him the whereabouts of his kidnapped daughter? Then his native ferocity pricked by the memory of the insult done him, awoke to provide him with a solution to the problem confronting him.

"Why not kill him?"

"And the *gringo* too?" inquired Piola, ironically. "You have an answer to everything!"

The *gaucho* from the Andes moved uneasily as though instinctively he felt the proximity of danger. He could not believe that those two men had come alone. Others must be close at hand to lend them help. The best thing for Manos Duras to do in this situation was to mount his swift horse without further loss of time, and start off with his prize on the saddle in front of him for that part of the banks of the Limay where he was to meet the rest of the expedition. Certainly he ought to give up the idea of keeping any engagement in La Presa that night. Prudence demanded a change of plans. While he was riding for safety with the



girl, Piola and his men, would remain to distract the attention of the pursuers. He could spend several hours convincing the old man that his suspicions were ill-founded. And if other pursuers arrived from the town they too would be convinced, on finding that the *gauchos* had no woman in their possession, and discovering no evidence of Manos Duras having been at Dead Squaw ranch, that his comrades were merely peaceable travellers using the ranch as a camping ground.

Manos Duras listened impatiently. No ; he had taken a fancy to the adventure just as it was and would not change any detail of the plan he had made. He wanted to keep Celinda, well and good, but he would not give up his visit to La Presa, where, as soon as it grew dark, he was going to present himself on his mysterious errand.

"Well, there's another way out still," persisted Piola. "The old fellow is offering money for the girl. . . ."

But he got no farther. Close at hand, on the other side of the wall, a shot rang out, and then a cry. Manos Duras' trusted comrade uttered an oath.

"There ! The party's begun !" he exclaimed, raising the trigger of his gun, and running towards the spot from which the sound had apparently come.

What had happened was that while the man who checked their advance kept his gun aimed at Watson, who because of his youth seemed the more dangerous of the two, Rojas had cautiously removed his revolver from the holster and fired.

The man on guard fell over on his face, and Watson at once grasped his rifle.

At the moment when Piola came around the turn of the building, Rojas had already mounted his horse, for, like many of his forefathers, he felt more secure on his mount than he could ever feel standing on solid ground. Watson, who had been wrestling with the wounded man for posses-



sion of the rifle, at that moment wrested it from him, and was raising it to his shoulder, but when he found that the mountaineer was aiming at him, the American stooped with a quick, instinctive motion, and the bullet, which would otherwise have hit him square in the chest, merely grazed his left shoulder. But the smarting pain caused by the whizzing projectile made him drop the rifle he had seized, and raise his right hand to his wounded shoulder.

Piola stepped towards him to make sure of his second shot ; and at this point in the duel Manos Duras thrust his head out of the shelter of the corner wall.

What he noticed first was that Rojas was taking aim with his revolver at Piola. Manos Duras with his own revolver took aim at the rancher ; but he could not draw the trigger. The other mountaineer who had been scouting on the opposite side of the ranch came between him and his target.

“ There’s a whole lot of them coming,” he yelled.

The dogs were following him, making violent leaps in the direction of the invisible enemy and back again.

And now events followed one another in such rapid succession that all that happened seemed to crowd with fantastic velocity on the heels of what was already occurring. . . .

Manos Duras was the first to spring into action. With a rush he mounted his horse, nibbling at patches of coarse grass as undisturbed by the shots as though he heard such detonations every day ; and together, horse and cattle-thief disappeared behind the ranch house.

Piola turned from Watson to consider his own safety. He, too, felt safer on horseback ; keeping his rifle in his left hand, he jumped on his mount, and, with the remaining *gaucho*, went to keep guard over the troop of pack horses who represented the entire fortune of the band.

Rojas, apparently forgetting all possibility of danger to himself, rode towards Watson.



“What have they done to you, *gringuito* ? ” he asked with genuine emotion. “Have they killed you ? ”

“Nothing . . . a scratch . . . that’s all.”

Don Carlos had no time for more. It was imperative to discover what there was on the hidden side of the ranch house. He pushed his horse forward, and passed the screening angle of the building.

No one. The door of the ramshackle building stood wide open. Through the gaping aperture he could see the interior of the house. There was no one there. But as he looked up from this disappointing scene, he caught sight of a rider disappearing at a fast gallop in the direction of the mountains ; and this rider bore in front of him on the saddle a large bundle which he held with both arms ; and in spite of the rapidly widening distance, Celinda’s father could see that the bundle was struggling frantically.

‘Ah, you criminal, you horse-thief ! ’

He had had no worse fears. And while he stood, motionless for the moment with despair, it seemed to him that he could still hear his little daughter crying out to him for help. . . .



## CHAPTER XVII

WHEN Elena finally got up the next morning, she was astonished to find that Sebastiana paid no attention to her repeated calls.

At last, one of the half-breed girls who worked under the housekeeper's directions, presented herself and announced that Sebastiana hadn't come back to the house after her departure from it early that morning.

"They say there have been terrible goings-on at the Rojas ranch. The *comisario* and a lot of men are all riding out there now."

Sebastiana, it seemed, had been seen on horseback riding out of the town, accompanied by the Señor Robledo's servant.

"She has gone to see what happened to her mistress . . . everybody tells a different story. . . . But one thing is sure, and that is that someone was killed out at the ranch. . . ."

But the mistress of the house showed so little interest in what the young half-breed was saying that the girl stopped. A brief exclamation of surprise had been the only comment made by the Señora. Then she had lapsed into silence as though the subject bored her.

All that morning Elena spent in her parlour, after the little maid had brought her her breakfast. With impatience she contemplated the long hours that must elapse before night. One thing she had determined upon. She would send for Robledo, but he, too, according to the report of the servant girl, had gone with the *comisario* to the Rojas ranch and would probably not return before nightfall.

She could stay no longer in that place. For her husband



it was different ; he had his work there. But she would ask Robledo to pay her passage back to Paris, or at least to give her money enough to get to Buenos Aires. Once in the capital, she would know how to get along. In her early experiences she had had similar or worse situations to face, and she had long ago discovered that a woman of determined will can get out of difficulties far more easily than a man.

As she went over in her mind the conversation she would have later that day with the engineer, she felt consumed with impatience ; but at the same time she dreaded to see the hours glide swiftly by when she remembered that at the end of a certain number of them some one was likely to appear at her window and demand the fulfilment of a promise she had made the night before.

It required a tremendous effort on her part to believe that she had not dreamed that interview with Manos Duras. "What madness ! How could I—the person who is really I—have done such a thing ? "

Yet, many times before in her life, she had felt the same wonder at her own acts, as though there existed within her two antagonistic personalities, each one of which aroused the loathing of the other.

"And perhaps that man will actually come back here," she thought, with a tremor of nervous irritation.

To quiet her nerves, she assured herself that probably the *gaucho* would forget her promises. Then she remembered the vague news brought in by the maid-servant about some frightful occurrence or other at the Rojas ranch.

"He will not come," she kept saying to herself as she contemplated the possibility of Manos Duras' coming to see her that night as had been agreed. "How could he dare to make such absurd pretensions ? . . . "

No, certainly not ; and after the news which would by that time be the common talk of the town, he would not



dare come back to make any claims. And even though that semi-savage was a fear-inspiring opponent at close range, she had only to keep her doors and windows well locked in order to protect herself from his presence.

She stopped thinking about the *gaucho* ; but her memory was still tormented by memories of the preceding night. What was it that had happened near dawn just as the open space of her window began to grow luminous ? She had been in the confused state of half-consciousness, when one's eyes refuse to open, and one's thoughts alternate between waking and sleep.

But now that she was quite waked up, and could contemplate what had occurred a few hours previously, she began to acquire the certainty that there had been some one close to her window that morning. Now she could distinctly remember the muffled sound of steps on the balcony, a slight creaking of the boards in the outside wall, as though some one were leaning heavily against them. She could even have averred that she had heard sounds like the lamentations of some one lost ; and instinctively she believed that the being who had been near her in the night on the other side of the bungalow wall was no other than her husband.

Twice she had gone to the window and had opened it in the hope of finding some paper or other trace of her invisible visitor, who had come with the dawn, and vanished at sunrise.

"It was Federico," she thought. "It could have been no one else. . . . Robledo must know where he is ! How I wish he would come back so that I could speak to him !"

A little after mid-day, as she was smoking her twentieth cigarette, there came a knock at the door. Several moments elapsed, and again came a knock. Elena concluded that, since Sebastiana was no longer there to keep them in order, the young servant-girls had left the house after lunch, to run about the town in search of news and gossip.



So she went to open the door herself, and was much astonished at sight of her caller. It was Moreno. There was nothing so remarkable about his coming to call, yet Elena could not conceal a gesture of astonishment. She had forgotten him so completely! Of late, other men than he had completely absorbed her attention.

Blushing with embarrassment for the forgetfulness of him her surprise had betrayed, she invited him to enter in a tone of quite exaggerated affability. Surely it was her good luck which was sending her this fool to entertain her with his conversation during the interminable afternoon that somehow or other she must live through! And this call was at least a break in the monotony of her solitude.

As he came in, Moreno looked at the furniture with a gently protective air quite as though it belonged to him. Then, with an assurance he had never before revealed, he sat down in the chair which the Marquésa indicated he was to occupy.

"I'm off to Buenos Aires by the afternoon train, Señora Marquésa," he announced with the gravity of a man who knows his own importance. "I must see the Government representatives and give them an account of what happened here, and talk with the minister of public works about keeping things going on."

Elena received all this with nods of understanding and sympathy, her eyes all the while smiling maliciously . . . it was amusing to see this worthy family man stressing his own importance.

"But before I went away, I wanted to see you again to discuss a matter relating to my future responsibilities."

As he went on talking, the malicious sparkle in Elena's eyes suddenly went out, and in its place came a look of avid interest that at moments increased to burning intensity.

"Poor fellow," said Moreno, as he related how Pirovani had entrusted his entire fortune to him, making him the



guardian of his only daughter, who was at school in Italy, "poor fellow. . . . I find, on looking through his papers, that he was even better off than I thought. This responsibility he has left me is going to take most of my time, and I may have to resign from my position. I don't even know that I'll be able to come back here. Perhaps it will be a long time before we see one another again."

The Government employee grew sad at the thought of this prolonged separation, although he managed to maintain the expression of intense self-satisfaction which he had worn ever since the day of the funeral.

"As poor old Pirovani left the management of his fortune to me, and as this house belongs to his heir, of whom I am the legal guardian, I am empowered, Señora Marquésa, to tell you that you may remain here as long as it suits your convenience, just as though it were your own house, and without any question of your paying a single cent for it. There is nothing I wouldn't do for you, Marquésa !"

Her enquiring eyes looked at him fixedly. It was difficult to conceal from him the surprise this news had caused her. Moreno, of all people, the trustee of the contractor's fortune, and still dazed by the amount of the fortune so suddenly thrust into his possession, and about to return to a great city, there to begin a new kind of existence. . . .

Little by little, from the sea of her amazement, new plans began to emerge like islands still of uncertain shape and in process of formation. Within her, a dividing process was going on ; side by side with the woman of frivolous tastes, hungry for comforts and luxuries, emerged that other woman, the one of ferocious energy, capable of harsh resolution in difficult moments, the one who did not hesitate to commit cruelties. And this woman, as she became roused, was imperiously commanding her companion :

"Don't let this man go away . . . Fate has sent him to you !"



Moreno, who was looking at her with more audacious eyes than in the days when he had no hope of ever being rich and powerful, saw a shadow on the Señora Marquésa's face as though an invisible cloud were passing over her. Then the corners of her mouth quivered, perhaps with pain, and she raised her hands to her eyes, as though to hide some tears.

Moreno got up from his chair to console her. He remembered, at sight of her mourning, that she must at that very moment be grieving over the death of her husband's mother. And in addition to that bereavement there was the death of Pirovani, and Canterac's flight, and so many distressing occurrences in so short a time. . . .

"All these things are very sad, Señora Marquésa, but you must not weep, my friend!"

And he dared go so far as to take hold of her hands, pressing them gently as he removed them from her eyes, humid with tears.

"I am not weeping for what is past," she sighed, "but for myself, for my misfortunes. For them there is no remedy. I am all alone in the world. My husband has not come back here since the day before yesterday . . . and perhaps he will never come back. Who knows what calumnies people may have poured into his ears! I had friends once, good friends, and one has died, while the other is a fugitive. . . . You were the only one left me . . . and now you are going away for ever!"

Shaken by these words, the Government employee began to stammer:

"But you must always count on me, Señora Marquésa. . . . I am going away, but in reality I am not going at all, for you will have me in Buenos Aires, and . . ."

He decided that it was wiser not to go on, for his emotions might make him incoherent. Elena, who had dried her tears, was looking at him with passionate interest.



"I never have been able to make people understand me," she said. "Men, for instance, are always like this. They all come running when a woman strikes their fancy, and they pursue her with their attentions, each in turn gaining possession of his rival's place until the poor thing is so confused she doesn't know which of them all she really prefers. Now that you are going away, and that I am losing you, perhaps forever, I suddenly take account of the fact that it was always the two poor friends who have already left us who deliberately crowded into the front row, and in doing so hid from me the man who is really the one I am most interested in!"

Moreno was so impressed by these words that he took Elena's left hand in his.

"What are you saying, Marquésa?"

She let him caress her hand, and then wove her smooth fingers about one of his, adding, in a tone of utmost sincerity, as though revealing her most intimate thoughts:

"You always interested me . . . because you were so modest, and I recognized that modesty as being the kind that accompanies great ability, abilities that you yourself do not yet suspect the existence of in yourself. I like men who are good, men who have no false pride. So often, when I was alone, I amused myself imagining what a man like you might have become had you lived in Europe . . . and had you met the right woman to inspire you, and to advise you and encourage your awakening ambition. . . ."

Moreno remained silent, looking at Elena with a kind of astonishment, as though the words she had just uttered had won from him the utmost he was capable of in the way of admiration. This wonderful woman had the same thoughts that came to him so often . . . but he had never dared put his faith in them. . . .

Elena sadly threw back her shoulders.



"But it is too late to talk of such things," she went on in a tone of discouragement.

"You have a family to work for, and I . . . I am a woman with neither illusions nor hopes, I am alone, I am poor . . . and I do not know what is in store for me."

The Government clerk remained pensive, his eyebrows drawn together, as though mentally contemplating a vision thoroughly distasteful to him. What he saw was a little house in the suburbs of Buenos Aires; in its modest, clean little rooms were a woman and some children . . . his children, his wife . . . and then rapidly the vision vanished like a puff of smoke, and Moreno recovered the air of assured self-satisfaction he had displayed on first arriving that afternoon.

"I, too," he said, "was busy thinking about a great many things last night. I couldn't sleep, and got up very late. That's why I didn't have time to find out about what had happened at the Rojas' place. . . . One of the things I was thinking was that it might be a good idea for me to go to Europe to look up Pirovani's daughter, and keep a closer watch over his property than I could do in Buenos Aires. Who knows? I might be able to increase his fortune considerably, if I attended strictly to business. . . . I am not vain enough to think that I have all the ability you attribute to me, Marquésa; but it is true that I know a little arithmetic, and that I am methodical. I might be able to do at least as well as other men in business . . . why not?"

A long pause followed, and finally Moreno plucked up the courage to stammer timidly:

"You might come with me to Europe, Marquésa . . . to advise me. For, in spite of the flattering opinion you have of me, I would be so ignorant there of the things I ought to know. . . ."

Elena started, and then, with a proud gesture, repelled this suggestion.



"How could I accept such a thing? You are mad! . . . . But, my dear Moreno, you would find me a terrible burden . . . and, besides, I am a married woman, and if we travelled together, people would inevitably make the worst suppositions about us!"

In spite of her protest, she took Moreno's hands in hers and brought her face close to his, surrounding him with the fragrant effluvia of her perfumed flesh; and at the same time she exclaimed warmly:

"What a great big heart you have! How can I show you how much I appreciate your offering to do this?"

Moreno assumed an imploring expression as he in turn protested; what could it matter to them what people said? . . . . Anyway, no one knew them in Europe. They could live in Paris, that marvellous city that he had so often admired and that he might never have had the chance to see, had not Pirovani's death made it possible . . . and it was for him to thank the Marquésa if she should deign to accompany him and give him her invaluable counsel.

"But your family?" inquired Elena, with an austerity of intonation belied by her eyes.

With the good-natured cynicism of a rich man who firmly believes that every difficulty in life can be solved by money, he replied:

"My family can stay in Buenos Aires. I'll see to it that they have much better quarters than they have ever had before. All that can easily be arranged with money, and everybody will be happy. As for myself, I shall, of course, have quite an income, for naturally I must pay myself for my work as guardian. And besides that, I shall make money in a business way."

But Elena persisted with her refusals, although with diminishing intensity, and Moreno thought the moment propitious for trying to overcome her resistance by describing the delights of that Paris which he had never seen



and those pleasures she had grown unmindful of from having known them so well.

"It is madness," persisted Elena, interrupting him. "I haven't the courage to face the scandal that would surely come of it. Just imagine what people would say if we went away together!"

And then, assuming the modest, timid expression a young girl might wear if confronted with something offensive to her innocence, she murmured:

"I am not the sort of woman you think me. Men are so fearfully ready to believe everything they hear about a woman . . . and Heaven only knows what people may have said to you about me! . . . I alone can know how unhappy I have been in my marriage. My husband is good, yes . . . but he never understood me. Still, all that is a far cry from running away with another man, and giving everybody the right to talk about me!"

And then all the phrases stored in his memory from his assiduous reading of society novels came pouring out. . . . What did marriage amount to, anyway? . . . And how could what people said have any weight with her? It was her right to have real love in her life, and to take it wherever she might find it . . . and it was just as surely her right to "live her own life," side by side with a man capable of making life beautiful for her, of making it worthy of all her wonderful gifts!

And as these passages culled from hundreds of novels came out one after the other, Moreno had the satisfaction of seeing that Elena, too, was familiar with all these arguments, and that she, too, was moved and softened (just as he was himself) by his literary but none the less impassioned eloquence.

What the Marquésa was actually thinking was that she had carried on this pretence of resistance long enough, and that it was now time to give in gracefully so as to clear the



way for a discussion of more immediate and urgent matters. As though unaware of what she was doing, she placed her hands on his shoulders, and spoke close to him, in a scarcely audible tone, and looking up at the farthest corner of the room, as though lost for the moment in a host of memories.

"Paris!" she murmured. "You know it from books, but they can give you only a feeble idea of what life there is really like. Oh, if you knew what a delicious experience is awaiting us there!"

Moreno took these words to be an acceptance of his proposals, and believed himself authorised by them to put his arms around her.

"You do accept, then? . . . Oh, thank you! Thank you!"

But she gently pushed him away, checking his caresses, and with the gravity of demeanour of a woman who knows how to make clear and definite business arrangements, she said:

"If I should come to the point of saying 'I accept,' it would be only on condition that we should leave this very day. Otherwise I may repent of my decision, and change my mind. . . . Besides, why should I stay in this hateful hole? When even my husband has abandoned me . . . and I don't know what has become of him. . . ."

Moreno replied by nodding vigorously. They ought to take advantage of the train leaving that very afternoon. If they waited for the next, something to hinder them might develop before they could get away . . . and the poor fellow actually believed that the Marquésa was capable of repenting of her decision . . . that he must make the most of this favourable moment.

She, meanwhile, was asking numerous questions, each of which constituted an article in the verbal contract that was being so definitely drawn up between them. Moreno made clear to her that his claim to the guardianship of Pirovani's fortune was well substantiated by the papers the



Italian had left. The fortune of which he would have charge was ample. By great good luck—for them—it happened that the contractor had, before the duel, entrusted all the cash he had on hand to his second. This made it possible for Moreno to pay the expenses of the trip to the capital, as well as provide funds for Elena's establishment in a luxurious hotel there.

"And once in Buenos Aires," he went on, "I shall assemble all the deposits Pirovani had in numerous banks there, and I'll also try to collect what the Government owes him for the work here in La Presa. I know a lot of influential people who'll help me get that money. You'll see that even though some people around here may think I'm a fool, I'm not so slow when it comes to making people pay me what they owe me. . . . And just as soon as that little matter is settled, we'll start for Europe."

Once more, emboldened by his own words, and certain of Elena's acceptance, he put his arms about her, but again she repulsed him.

"No," she said severely, though at the same time there was a gleam of malicious amusement in the eyes she rapidly turned away from him, "I warn you that until we get to Paris I shall be no more to you than your travelling companion. Men are always ungrateful if they attain their desires too easily . . . and they have been known to take advantage of a woman's generosity, and forget all their handsome promises!"

Then she smiled with a look that promised many things, and murmured very low, dropping her eyes:

"But, as soon as we get to Paris . . ."

Moreno was profoundly moved by the gesture that accompanied her words.

"Paris!" At the word the Government clerk's imagination excitedly reviewed all he had read about the episodes of the gay life led by foreigners in the French capital. . . .



A luxurious all-night restaurant, such as those he always thought of as being plentifully scattered through Montmartre, and such as those he had so often admired in "movie" films. . . . It seemed to him that he could actually hear the harsh, restless music of a jazz-band . . . and his eyes followed the circling of the couples dancing in a great rectangle, bordered by glittering tables.

Then the Marquésa came in, gorgeously dressed . . . she was leaning on his arm . . . he wore a dress coat and an enormous pearl on his shirt-front. The major-domo of the establishment welcomed him with the familiar respect due a well-known customer, the women from afar cast enviously admiring glances at Elena's jewels. . . . Then a groom, diminutive as a gnome, carried off the Marquésa's magnificent fur wrap that scattered a perfume through the air like that of a tropical garden. . . . And now he was examining the wine-list, and ordering a high-priced champagne, whose very name called forth from the manager of the establishment a reverently hushed tone of admiration. . . .

The vision vanished ; he was still in Pirovani's former house, sitting beside the woman whom he had desired with all the fervour that men isolated and lonely feel for something that seems forever beyond their reach ; and now his eager and hungry eyes rested upon her.

"Paris !" he repeated. "How I want to be there with you . . . Elena. For you will allow me to call you Elena, won't you ?"



## CHAPTER XVIII

TO young Watson it seemed that events were now following one another with the dizzy rapidity and the absurd lack of logical sequence characteristic of a dream or of something equally independent of time and space.

First came shots ; then there passed before his eyes several riders, some of them advancing at a gallop while others, halting, fired at the mountaineers. In vain Piola raised both hands in the air, shouting :

“ Don’t shoot, brother, we surrender ! ”

The men just arriving didn’t want to hear and went on firing in spite of Robledo’s shouts.

Piola’s comrade fell wounded ; and at this Piola himself thought it advisable to fall to the ground and take refuge behind his horse.

The whole group of horsemen from La Presa were finally assembled on the same plateau in front of the ranch house ; but Watson paid not the slightest attention to Robledo’s exclamations of astonishment at finding him there. Nor did he waste any time on the *comisario*’s salutations. Anyway, these two recent arrivals promptly forgot him, and went to see what information they could get out of Piola by placing their revolver muzzles against his chest, while they demanded to be told what had been done with Celinda. Some of the other members of the rescue party dismounted to have a look at the man just wounded as well as at the one hit a few minutes earlier by Don Carlos.

What most attracted Watson’s attention in the whole strange scene was the presence of his own horse there, with Cachafaz importantly straddling him and pointing accusingly at the three prisoners.



"It was those bad *gauchos* who took away my *patroncita* ! I saw them ! "

But he was inconsiderately interrupted, for someone grasped him round the waist and rudely robbed him of the dignity of his commanding position by setting him down on the sand.

With a determined effort to pay no attention to the pain caused him, Richard had made use of his one serviceable arm to get possession of his horse. The animal recognised the feel of his master in the saddle, and needed no spurring to start off at full gallop in the direction taken by Rojas.

The rancher had already been in close pursuit of Manos Duras for several minutes, and he had not given up hopes of overtaking him. It was difficult to keep the horses at a gallop on those sandy slopes, and besides, the animal Manos Duras rode had two burdens to carry ; and all the while he was spurring on his horse the bandit had to keep tight hold of the still unsubdued Celinda. Rojas had the advantage of two free hands as he gave chase.

The *gaucho* turned around several times, taking aim with the revolver he held in his left hand. Two bullets whistled past Don Carlos. He replied with two bullets, then stopped. He had just discovered that he had only three more cartridges. That morning when he had started out for La Presa he had strapped on his holster case without filling the empty sockets. Only three shots more ! But in his belt he had the knife he always carried for the emergencies that might arise as he rode over his property. . . . Besides, shooting was dangerous. He might wound Celinda.

The *gaucho*, better supplied with shot, went on firing with great lavishness as he sped away.

An overwhelming indignation swept through the rancher as he perceived what Manos Duras was attempting to do.

"Shameless cattle thief ! He's aiming at my horse ! "



And to the horse-loving creole, this was as despicable a crime, as just a cause for unlimited vengeance, as the injury done him, Don Carlos Rojas, by the theft of his daughter.

But in a few moments the rancher who rode a horse as though moulded to it, felt a mortal shudder under him. Instantly he lifted his feet from the stirrups and jumped to the ground, but scarcely had his foot touched the sand when the animal fell heavily, a stream of blood pouring out of his breast like the crimson spurtings of a shattered wine cask.

The rancher stood by helplessly, while the bandit sped away, holding Celinda down on the saddle-tree. . . . Then he concentrated all his will on the hand that held his revolver. He must kill the bandit's horse.

And the man trembled with emotion. Not all his combats with men and wild beasts had prepared him for this. How could he, to whom a horse was like a child of his flesh, shoot one down in cold blood ? . . . But there, growing smaller in the increasing distance, was Celinda, struggling, crying out !

He was, as a rule, a sure shot. But he fired without effect ; and again he fired. The *gaucho* still sped on, and Don Carlos raised his revolver for the last shot. Suddenly Manos Duras' horse staggered, slowed down, plunged to the ground, raising a cloud of dust in a last frenzied kick.

Rojas ran forward ; but before he reached the struggling group Manos Duras had already extricated himself from the saddle, and, still holding Celinda, stood waiting for him, his second revolver drawn.

Don Carlos went a few steps further ; but the shot that rang out passed so near his cheek that for a moment he thought it must have caught him. He dropped to the ground in order to offer the marksman a smaller target, and dragged himself along, keeping his revolver in his left hand.



The *gaucho*, unaware that his enemy had but one shot left, thought it was Don Carlos' intention to draw nearer so as to make sure of the effect of his bullets, and he went on firing, holding Celinda in front of him the while as a shield against her father's shots. But the girl's struggles to free herself from the grip of that sinewy arm shook his hand and spoiled the bandit's aim.

This warning, added to the knowledge that he had but one more bullet in his cartridge chamber, forced Don Carlos to content himself with slowly crawling forward over the sand, seeking the shelter of the hummocks on its surface.

But meanwhile Manos Duras became instinctively aware of the presence of a new danger. He looked about, attempting to discover it; but the one menacing him from in front soon called for all his attention.

The invisible enemy recently arrived was Watson, who, when he heard shots, dismounted, and under cover of the rough desert brush, advanced Indian-fashion towards the scene of the revolver duel.

For a moment he felt tempted to fire from the back at Manos Duras; but there was danger of his wounding Celinda, whose movements could not be counted on. So he returned to his horse and detached from the saddle the lasso that the Señorita de Rojas had given him. Holding it in his right hand, he circled about through the *matorrales* until he was directly behind the bandit.

Going even this short distance caused him acute pain. Several times the thorny branches of the harsh desert growths caught at his wounded shoulder; and uncertainty made him tremble with nervousness. Would he have sufficient skill to use this primitive weapon?

He was troubled at recalling how Flor de Rio Negro had laughed at him, in childish enjoyment of his clumsiness; but the memory of the happy rides they had had together, and the sight of her now in close peril of death or worse,



brought his energy flooding back ; and some of the principles instilled in him as a boy, and the methodical, practical spirit of his race, came to stiffen his courage. " Whatever you do, do it well " . . . somehow that seemed to the point. Confiding in the mysterious and intangible powers that control our lives, and that from time to time show an inexplicable preference for some of us, and protect us from apparently inescapable dangers, Richard threw his rope, almost without looking, trusting to his luck and his sure sense of distance. Then he began pulling in, backing his horse in the brush. At the sudden resistance of the lariat, he felt the joyful assurance that he had caught his game. So savage was his joy that he pulled with both hands, though several groans escaped him for the pain he felt from the laceration of his shoulder.

And, as a matter of fact, the rope had caught both Manos Duras and Celinda, and suddenly they both tumbled backward under the impact of a sudden pull.

The *gaucho* let go of Celinda so as to free both hands. Even while he was being drawn along the ground he managed to get at his knife and cut the rope that bound him. But Watson had foreseen this, and running forward, dealt him several blows on the head with the butt of his revolver. Rojas, meanwhile, reached the struggling group and throwing his now useless weapon down, grasped his knife.

" Leave him to me, *gringo*," he gasped. " I don't want anybody to take this job from me. . . . I have a right to it ! "

He pushed Watson vigorously out of the way, and the latter turned to Celinda, picked her up from the ground and carried her off to a distance of a few yards. She was so stunned by the fall that she did not recognize him, but stood passing her hands over her forehead, and gazing blankly about her, while blood trickled from the cuts on her arms and face.



Don Carlos, meanwhile, was almost helping Manos Duras to get to his feet.

"Stand up, son of evil ! . . . Or you'll be saying that I am killing you without giving you a chance ! Get out your knife and fight, damn your soul !"

Manos Duras, as a matter of fact, already held his knife in his hand, but the rancher, beside himself at finally having the *gaucho* within reach, had not noticed it.

But scarcely had the bandit got a footing than he treacherously made a plunge toward his pursuer, trying to stab him below the belt. However, the blows dealt him by Watson had dazed him sufficiently to slow down all his movements, and the rancher had time to parry the blow with a back-stroke of his left hand. Then Don Carlos landed a thrust on the bandit's chest, and another and another, in such swift succession that Manos Duras, blood pouring out from the numerous gashes he had just received, toppled over. . . .

"The puma's done for !" shouted Don Carlos, holding up his blood-dripping knife. The bandit, writhing at his feet, was uttering snorts of an agony that could only end in death.

Watson had led Celinda a certain distance away so that she should not witness this scene ; but he had kept close watch of what was going on, ready to lend help if Don Carlos should need it.

The two men helped Celinda to the spot where Watson had left his horse ; in their anxiety lest she should see the bandit in his death-agony, they almost carried her between them. But still dazed by the rapid succession of events, the girl looked about with vague, dilated eyes, as though she recognized nothing in her surroundings. Finally, she burst into tears, and threw her arms about her father. Then, entirely unmindful of the attitude she maintained towards him when she was quite herself, she threw her arms about Watson too, and kissed him.



Stirred by her unexpected caress, and distressed by the sight of the scratches and cuts on the girl's face, Richard asked anxiously :

" Did I hurt you, Señorita ? . . . But don't you think I managed a little better with the lariat this time ? "

Then the two men helped Celinda to get on the horse and walked along beside her to Dead Squaw ranch.

At sight of them, Robledo and the commissioner came out with a joyful welcome. In front of the ranch house stood the other men of the expedition, who, after attending in their own way to the wounds of their captives, were keeping watch over them as well as over Piola. It had been decided to take them all to the jail in the capital of the territory on the very next day.

Meanwhile, Celinda, finding herself once more among friends, who were eagerly expressing their delight at her rescue, began to recover her usual spirits. She tried to hide her face from Watson so that he shouldn't see all the cuts that disfigured it ; but at the same time she eyed him with a new tenderness.

" Did I really hurt you, . . . Celinda ? " the youth kept asking in an imploring tone, as though his emotions would not at the moment permit of his saying anything else. " But didn't I do better with the lasso ? Didn't I ? "

After glancing about to see whether her father were near enough to hear, she murmured, imitating his foreign accent :

" Clumsy *gringo* ! Great big stupid ! I should say you *did* hurt me, and you manage a lasso as badly as possible. . . . But never mind ! As long as you caught that bad man with me, and as long as I said that you'd have to catch me that way if you wanted me . . . here I am ! "

And puckering up her lips she blew him a kiss, as a kind of promise of what his reward would be when later they should find means of being alone.



At dusk the expedition reached La Presa, after a short halt at the Rojas ranch, where they found Sebastiana. The half-breed, at sight of her young mistress, burst out into loud exclamations of joy, which later were transformed into cries of indignation when she saw the marks on Celinda's face. In the midst of her indignant vituperations, the Marquésa's name escaped her, in spite of Robledo's commands to her that she be discreet. And finally she ended up by telling Rojas all that she knew of the interview between the "Señorona" and Manos Duras, and of all that she suspected it signified.

Sebastiana, quite as a matter of course, decided to remain at the ranch, and did not consider it necessary to ask Don Carlos' permission to do so. The rancher himself, however, urged Watson to stay with him until the following day, when he would accompany his guest to town.

"I have some urgent business to attend to at La Presa, just a few things to say to a certain person there," said Don Carlos in a voice so soft it was terrifying to hear. Robledo, divining his intentions, tried to dissuade him from the trip.

"Leave me alone, Don Manuel. I'm going to see that woman. You know what she tried to do to my girl. All I want is to pick up her skirts and give her a thrashing with this whip of mine, so . . ."

And he snapped the leather thong of his short riding whip.

Convinced, finally, that there was no deterring Don Carlos from his purpose, Robledo finally consented to being accompanied by him to the settlement. The fury of his combat with the *gaucho* had not yet abated in Celinda's father, but Robledo hoped that within a few hours it would have subsided a little.

When they reached the main street, the rescue party found nearly the whole population of La Presa assembled to meet them. The men, riding ahead, gave out the news of



the skirmish as they passed by the different groups and their words sped through the crowd with startling rapidity. There was general and frankly expressed rejoicing at the death of Manos Duras, as though the town had by that event been freed from a dangerous menace. Some of the men went so far as to lament the fact that the *comisario* should have left the three prisoners under guard at Dead Squaw ranch until they could be conveyed to the prison of the territory. With that ferocity which always manifests itself in a crowd when finally it has been liberated from something that it feared, the men and women who had gathered to hear the news would have liked to tear these friends of the dead *gaucho* to pieces, in order to be avenged for the terror he had inspired in them when he was alive.

Suddenly, the throng caught at something that promised the satisfaction of its most ferocious instincts. A few of Sebastiana's words were repeated, and in a twinkling the whole story was out. So it was the great Señora, the "Señorona," who, with Manos Duras, had planned this terrible act of vengeance! A vengeance which seemed more like the horrible things they had heard tell of, or that they themselves had seen in the "movies," than anything they had ever witnessed in actual life. To think that that white-skinned *gringa* had tried to destroy the ranch girl, their own Flor de Rio Negro, daughter of the land and the friend of every one of them!

Robledo, on horseback, moving back and forth from one group to another, guessed from a few phrases caught at random that the anger rising rapidly in the crowd was assuming dangerous proportions. At that very moment they were passing poor Pirovani's former dwelling. Some of the women began crying out shrilly as they looked up at the windows:

"Down with the painted face! Death to the murderous she-dog!"



The worst insults in their feminine vocabularies were hurled through the air. Anticipating what was going to happen, Robledo changed his course and went up to the house, backing his horse up against the outside steps. But for once not even those men who were most loyal to him supported him in his purpose.

Heedless of his advice as of his commands, women and children dived under his horse or slipped behind its flanks, and the invading movement having been started, the men thronged into the basement of the house, apologising, with a lift of their caps, as they passed in front of the engineer.

The assault of the enemy's quarters was very rapid, every obstacle in the way of the invaders being overcome with that ease which seems characteristic of popular attacks on days of successful revolutionary outbreaks. The front door fell in, shattered by a few determined blows, and the human tide eddied for a moment around the opening, then, in surge after surge, swept into the house. Broken panes fell out of the windows, followed by all manner of projectiles, furniture, clothes, dishes, and in vain did some of the more moderate members of the crowd protest against this senseless destruction.

"But this isn't *her* house," they were repeating. "This all belongs to Don Enrique, the Italian!"

The crowd, however, turned a deaf ear. It preferred to believe that everything there *did* belong to the "Señorona" so as to be able to vent its rage without scrupling about other people's property. And all the while the invaders screamed out insults, in the hope that their words would scorch the "Señorona's" ears, just as they hoped that their hands might tear at her flesh.

But finally Robledo, still on his horse, calling out orders that went unobeyed, succeeded in gaining the attention of the crowd, which had grown tired of its work of destruction. Its energies had suddenly diminished on discovering that its



hoped-for victim was no longer within reach ; but the real reason for its subsiding into a relative silence which allowed Robledo to make himself heard, was the arrival of an old Spanish labourer who had retired from the works at the dam in order to carry on the business of delivering water to his customers in the town. Prodding and cursing at the miserable old nag that unwillingly drew his ramshackle cart containing a water-tank, he daily made the rounds of La Presa ; and from this conveyance he now began haranguing the mob at Pirovani's.

"What are you doing here, blunder-heads? She's gone!" he yelled shrilly. "I saw her in a carriage with the Señor Moreno, the Government fellow. They were on their way to the station to take the train to Buenos Aires."

At once some of the men who had horses within reach offered to start off in pursuit. They had lost a good deal of time, but perhaps if they rode without any regard for their mounts they might get to Fuerte Sarmiento in time to catch the fugitives . . . .

But some of the others shook their heads. The train would go by within less than hour, and as it started out from the neighbouring town, it rarely reached Fuerte Sarmiento late.

But the women were insistent. Let the men who had horses try to get to the station and let them drag the "Señorona" back by the hair . . . and while they were screaming out what they would do if they had their way, some of the males of the party were expressing the opinion that it would be an excellent plan to take up a position along the railway track and, when the train came by, shoot. . . . They appeared to have quite overlooked the fact which Robledo tried to point out to them, that even if they knew which particular coach contained the Marquésa, there would be other travellers in it, whom they would have little excuse for murdering.



Hoarse with shouting, and convinced finally that the hated woman was now beyond their reach, they lapsed into glum silence.

Robledo seized his opportunity.

"Let her go. When she goes *Gualicho* goes, and he's troubled us enough. What we want is to keep this demon from ever coming back. If only he had been driven out long ago!"

As twilight deepened, the mob grew calmer. Supper time came, and even some of the most excitable members of the crowd decided to continue their discussion of the story either at their own homes, or at the *gallego's boliche*.

Rojas, plunged in gloom, had apparently forgotten all the other events of the day, and could think of nothing but Elena's having escaped him.

"But you don't know how I feel about it, Don Manuel! . . . I had something to say to her, by means of a whip."

And with a gesture indicating how he would have done it, he went on explaining just what he considered justice would have required him to do to the Marquésa.

From that day on, life in La Presa became a monotonous series of anxious days. Robledo was the only person of any importance left in the community. As operations at the dam remained suspended, the workmen began to drift away. Some of them, less impatient, spent their days in idleness talking of the prospects of the Government's ordering the works to begin again "next week." But the order never arrived. Down there at Buenos Aires they were taking their time to consider the matter, and as the months went by, one after another of the workmen lost patience, and finally took up his pack again to escape either on foot or by rail from a place where there was no money coming in and where poverty was gaining headway like a plague.

The *boliche* had taken on a funereal appearance. Only a



few of the old customers still came to toss off a drink at the *gallego's* counter. These were all men of assured solvency, Don Antonio having abruptly cut off the credit of all his other customers ; to back up this resolve he kept a revolver in his money drawer, and his handsome American rifle under his chair. When out of funds, his patrons amply justified all these precautions.

"You ought to go to Buenos Aires, Don Manuel," he kept saying hopefully to Robledo. "You're the only man from these parts they'll listen to up there."

The engineer, however, was as disheartened and gloomy as his surroundings. The only thing that ever drew a smile from him was the changed aspect of his partner. Watson had suddenly developed a cheerfulness which seemed to indicate that the fate of his once beloved canals was nothing to him now. According to his frank confession, the only subject that interested him was cattle-raising, and he spent all of his days at the Rojas ranch.

What was the momentary paralysis of the works at the dam to him? He was young, most of his life stretching ahead of him. Why not study cattle-farming in the meantime, especially as he had Flor de Rio Negro to teach him, as she rode by his side through her father's fields, from sunrise to sundown?

But an incident that occurred shortly after Elena's flight had tinged everything with black melancholy for Robledo. Gonzalez had brought him a hat that one of his compatriots had found near the river, at a distance from the camp. The engineer had recognized it at once. It was Torre Bianca's.

For some time he had felt certain that his friend was no longer alive. Often at night, when the financial difficulties in which the works were involved kept him awake, he reconstructed the events which one morning at dawn had made Elena's husband leave the house of the friend with whom he had taken refuge.



There could be little doubt now. Torre Bianca's body must be at the bottom of the river.

And so it proved. The owner of the *boliche* came to him again to tell him of the discovery made by some of the men who, being out of work, had gone fishing two leagues down the river. Near a reed-encircled island they expected to find some of the trout that often came down-stream from Lake Nahuel-Huapi. And among the reeds they had noticed two long black objects swayed by the ripples—the legs of a drowned man.

Robledo had not the heart to examine the body, but his compatriot, Gonzalez, found evidence from the clothing that the drowned man was Torre Bianca.

After this, Robledo felt more inclined to yield to the *gallego's* insistent urgings to go to Buenos Aires to make a plea for the continuance of the work on the dam. Recognizing the possibility of his being more useful to the despairing community in Buenos Aires than at La Presa, he started off for the capital and spent several months there, going from one Government office to another, struggling with the entanglements of administrative red tape, and making a determined effort to provide resources in order to maintain his credit at the banks. But to his dismay he found that the business men who had up to that time given their support to his enterprise, were unwilling to put more money into the work, and little by little he became aware of the general distrust felt of everything connected with La Presa.

Winter came, and Robledo had not yet accomplished enough to feel justified in leaving Buenos Aires. There were days when, in a sudden spurt of optimism, he had hopes of accomplishing his purpose within the week. But when, armed with a new argument, he presented himself at the Government bureaus, he was met with the set phrase, "Come back to-morrow." And the to-morrow they meant,



as he came to discover, was not the to-morrow following to-day, but something vague and nebulous in the future, a to-morrow that would never dawn.

One morning, the papers brought news of the uneasiness felt in the river towns at the unprecedentedly rapid rise of the Rio Negro. The tributary streams were all bringing down enormous quantities of water, and it seemed impossible that the banks of the larger stream would be able to contain the rapidly rising torrent. And this was the state of things that he had come to warn the Government about, this was the condition that his dam, had it been nearer completion, would have been able to control.

Then came a telegram from his friends in La Presa, excitedly imploring him to come back, as though his presence possessed a miraculous power over the forces of nature itself.

He reached the town during a spell of icy cold that made him shiver in the fur-lined coat he had worn during the sharpest days of the winter. The streets of the town were deserted. The houses of wooden construction, best fitted to keep out the cold, kept their windows and doors tight shut. The roofs of the *adobe* buildings were crumbling, and the hurricanes from the plateau-lands had torn out the wooden frames of the windows. There was no one in sight ! The only inhabitants of the place were those who had been there before the dam had been begun. To the engineer's eyes the place looked as though ten years had elapsed since he had left it.

For days at a time he stood on the bank watching the growing volume of water in the great stream. Then the current began bringing down trees from the upper reaches of the river, and Robledo's helpless indignation grew as he saw the danger to which all the lower river country was exposed, increasing hourly. And now it was no longer trees torn from the slopes of the giant Andes, but great



round enormous boulders, hidden from view, on the sandy bottom, that the river rolled furiously down-stream.

It was not so much the danger of flood that worried Robledo as the probable fate of the unfinished wall of the dam. Each morning, with the methodical care of a doctor testing his patient, he examined the great dyke thrown from bank to bank, the magnificent dam which, so well planned and constructed, had been left unfinished by its builders, first because of their absorbing love affairs, then because of their mortal rivalry.

The wider arm of the dam had been completed to within a few feet of the smaller one, and over these two walls the rising waters poured their volume, marking the place of the submerged obstructions with whirlpools and hissing foam.

Like all men who lead a life of danger, Robledo began to be superstitious, and as he watched the peril that was assuming gigantic proportions, he found himself addressing vague, mysterious divinities, imploring them to work a miracle.

"If only we can get through this winter without seeing this wall crash," he thought. "What luck! . . ."

But one morning, quite as though it were one of these sand walls that children spend hours building, and then break down at one capricious blow, the flooding waters snapped off one end of the unfinished arm, and then broke it up as though it were the least cohesive and resistant of substances; and finally those two submerged walls, in the building of which hundreds of men and thousands of tons of heavy, hard materials had been employed, those walls that had seemed as immovable as the mountains, rolled outward, then down-stream, crumbling as they went, to be tossed in fragments on the banks and on the shores of the reed-grown islands.

Robledo threw himself down on the ground in a paroxysm of weeping. Four years of work had melted away like so



much sugar before his eyes. "All to do over again . . . from the very beginning!"

His fellow-countryman, the owner of the *boliche*, saw ruin staring him in the face also. In that once prosperous establishment the money-drawer beside the counter was now empty; and with his customers had vanished all his hopes of transforming his sandy acres into fertile irrigated fields. He was a poor man now, poorer than when he had come to find his fortune in this accursed spot!

The *gallego* was plunged in heavy gloom; but his faith in Robledo and his desire to cheer him up, made the store-keeper try to appear optimistic.

"It will all come right some time," he would say over and over again, but without conviction.

Don Manuel, however, as he watched the merciless stream continue its work of destruction, felt rage growing within him. He no longer watched the river. His eyes had the vague expression of one whose thoughts have wandered far, who sees what is hidden to others.

Canterac and Pirovani appeared before his mind's eye as clear and distinct as though he had seen them only the day before. And then came a woman's face, smiling, but with the look of one intent on mischief in her tawny eyes.

Through time and space this woman exerted her evil influence on this distant corner of the globe. She, not nature's forces, was the real destroyer of the work of many men.

Robledo clenched his fists. He thought of Rojas and of how the rancher had wanted to punish this woman with whip-lashings. At that moment he would have devised for her something far worse.

"*Gualicho*, accursed *Gualicho*! Betrayer and tormentor of men, destroyer of men and of things! . . . perish the evil hour in which I brought you here."



*PART III.*

PARIS AGAIN







## CHAPTER XIX

“TWELVE years since I was in Paris ! Ay ! . . .  
How I have changed ! ”

As he spoke, Robledo looked pityingly at himself in the glass : he looked pityingly at himself every morning while he dressed.

He was still in vigorous health ; but unquestionably age had begun to leave its marks on him. The crown of his head was now completely bald. On the other hand, he had shaved off his moustache, for the simple reason that it had come to contain more white hairs than brown ones. This change, according to Robledo, made him look like a priest or a comic actor. But it was undeniable that it had restored to his appearance a certain jovial youthfulness.

He was sitting in a wicker chair in the lobby of one of the hotels that are to be found in Paris near the Arc de Triomphe. Opposite him sat a young married couple, no other than Watson and Celinda.

The years that had passed had merely emphasised Richard's features, bringing into sharper relief his athletic and tranquil beauty. Flor de Rio Negro had now attained the ripe sweetness of a midsummer fruit. She still preserved her youthful slimness, slightly modified ; she was now the mother of four children.

She no longer wore her hair cut in the style of a mediæval page, nor, in public, did she indulge in the childish exploits of the small Amazon who had once been the admiration of the immigrants on the wild Patagonian plains. The time had come when she considered it her duty to assume something at least of the grave dignity to be expected in the mother of a nine-year-old boy. This important member of the family now sat facing his parents. His restlessness



and his impatience of maternal remonstrances soon revealed the fact that he was a self-willed and somewhat disobedient small boy ; and he had already learned to seek " Uncle Manuel's " protection whenever his less understanding parents scolded him. Meanwhile, on an upper floor of the " palace " as most such hotels call themselves, two English nurses were occupied in watching over the play of the prosperous couple's three younger children.

The Watsons had the characteristic appearance of those South American families who go to spend several months in Europe every year or so, and who, rich and exuberant, travel tribe-fashion, transporting their whole establishments, including all the servants, from one side of the Atlantic to the other. The Watson family was as yet but barely started, and occupied merely four staterooms on board ship, and five rooms with a general sitting-room at the various hotels at which they stopped. But in ten years' time, with continued success in business, on its yearly trips to Europe the family caravan would be engaging all the staterooms on one side of the steamer and occupying a whole floor in the " palaces " it patronised.

" How many things have happened since I was here last ! "

Robledo's cheerful face became grave as he remembered the struggles of those two hard years during which he had fought ill-luck and failure, in order to make it possible for the works on the Rio Negro to be taken up again.

He had known all the anxieties of rapidly accumulating debts and the demands of creditors who cannot be paid. Nearly all the inhabitants of La Presa had abandoned the town when the river destroyed the works. The infrequent travellers who journeyed that way came principally to see the ruins, like those of the dead historic cities of the old world, and viewed with astonishment here in this land where ruins were scarcely known.



But at last the Government had taken up the work again. Little by little, the river allowed itself to be brought under control, and finally accepted even the obstructing dam. Then it was that Robledo's and Watson's canals drank their first waters, letting the vivifying irrigation-stream run over their oozy beds. After that had been accomplished, all that was needed was a little time to allow the miracle of water to work its own lesser miracles. Then men from all the lands of the globe began streaming in to the dead settlement, eager to break up and cultivate this new soil which would ultimately belong to them.

A delicate, luminous green was now creeping over the fields that had before been stretches of pebbles and dust. The dry, prickly *matorrales* gave place to young shade trees. Nourished by the accumulated fertility of a soil that had slept for thousands of years, constantly refreshed by the water gliding at their feet, in a marvellously short space of time these young growths developed prodigiously.

The miserable *adobe* hovels, that had fallen into decay and ruin during the period of poverty and abandonment, were now replaced by brick buildings that were wide and low, with an inner *patio* copied from the Spanish architecture of the colonial period. The *gallego's* former *boliche* became an enormous store, employing numerous clerks, where everything that might be required by customers, whose chief occupation was cultivating the miraculously redeemed soil, could be found; all manner of business was carried on at the *almacén*, including a large amount of banking.

The owner of the "store" had other sources of income as well, since his barren fields too had become irrigated lands. He had even realised his dream of returning to Spain, leaving one of his clerks in charge of the business.

"I had a letter from Don Antonio yesterday," said Robledo with good-natured irony. "He wants us to go to



Madrid. He wants to show off his house and his automobiles, and especially his friends. It seems that his dinner-parties have been getting into the newspapers. And he says that he has received a decoration, and that one of these days he is to be presented to the king . . . Lucky man ! ”

But at this reminder of her distant homeland, a shadow passed over Celinda's face.

“ She's thinking of her father,” said Watson to his partner. “ She can't bear to think of La Presa, and of his being there alone. But I don't see that we could help it if the old man wouldn't come with us ! ”

Robledo nodded, and tried to cheer the downcast Celinda. They had all done their best to persuade Don Carlos to accompany them, but he had not been able to make up his mind to leave the ranch. For him there was no particular interest in seeing Europe where he had committed so many follies in his youth. No ; he clung to his old illusions, he did not want to risk losing them. And besides, he was afraid that he would not have time to enjoy all the changes brought about on his estate.

“ I have so few years left to live,” he explained : “ I don't want to waste them wandering about through strange places, when there are so many things to do here. Celinda is going to give me a lot of grandchildren to provide for, and I don't want them to be beggars.”

Robledo's irrigation ditches had been carried as far as the Rojas ranch, and had transformed the thin dry pasturage of other times into inviting meadows of alfalfa, always humid and green. The herds were fattening and multiplying prodigiously. In the early days Don Carlos had had to ride miles in order to find one of his hard-horned, bony steers, as it strayed about the barren ranch in the hope of discovering some isolated patch of coarse grass. But now the steers, sleek and fat, their fore-legs fairly doubling up under the weight of their accumulating flesh, stood munch-



ing the succulent alfalfa that surrounded them without their having to stir a hoof to reach it.

Besides the reasons he offered for not going with them, Don Carlos, who was by this time the leading citizen of the region, felt that he would lose his importance in those *gringo* countries where nobody knew his name and where no one would make a fuss over him. He avoided trips to Buenos Aires even, since the friends of his youth had died. Their sons and grandsons showed only too plainly that they didn't know who he was ! But at La Presa, where he was known as the wealthiest land-owner of the district, every one treated him with a respect verging on reverence. Moreover, he was a municipal judge there, and the immigrants, the cultivators of *chacras* or small farms, in recognition of his authority and wisdom, consulted him on all sorts of subjects and accepted his decisions as gospel.

"What would I be doing in Paris ? . . . Bragging about all I had left at home ? . . . No, no, leave me with my own people. Let every steer chew his own cud ! "

But it cost the old man something to part with his grandchildren, although the separation was not to be a long one. And when Celinda, and the *gringo*, her husband, came back, the oldest boy would be just old enough for his grandfather to teach him how to ride as every good creole should.

This particular grandchild was now playing with Robledo, climbing onto his knees and delightedly diving off backwards on to the carpet.

"Carlitos, darling ! " implored his mother. " Do let your uncle Manuel have a little peace ! "

Then she went on, in reply to what Robledo had been saying about her father :

" It's true that he didn't want to come. But I can't help feeling disappointed about his not being here to see all that we see. "

A young woman, elegantly dressed, approached the



group. This was the French governess to whom had been deputed the education of young Carlos. It was time for him now to take a walk in the Bois de Boulogne. But he didn't want to go, and all his mother's petting failed to quell the spoiled child's protests.

"I want to stay with Uncle Manuel ! "

But it seemed that Uncle Manuel had to go out alone, as he told the small tyrant, quite with the air of offering him an apology.

"If you do what mamma asks and go to the Bois with Mademoiselle, I'll tell you a story to-night, a long one, when you go to bed."

Carlitos gave this promise a favourable reception, and without further objections allowed himself to be carried off by his governess.

"There goes our young despot," exclaimed Robledo, pretending immense satisfaction at being rid of him.

Celinda smiled. She knew well enough that Robledo had concentrated on this child of hers all the latent affection that childless and lonely men have it in them to expend as they draw near the boundaries of old age. He was already very rich, and his fortune could not but increase as the irrigated lands came under cultivation. Sometimes, when mention was made of his millions, he would look at Celinda's son, dignifying him with the name of "my chief heir." A part of his fortune would of course go to some nephews of his in Spain, whom he had seen once or twice ; but the major part of his fortune was destined to Carlitos.

For Watson's other children he had a great deal of affection also ; but this first-born had come into the world during a period that for Robledo was full of bitterness and uncertainty ; when all of his work was in danger of being irretrievably lost ; and for this reason he had for the child that special tenderness that one reserves for the companion of evil days.



“What are you going to do this afternoon?” Robledo asked of Celinda. “The same thing as usual, I suppose—calls on the most distinguished dressmakers of the Rue de la Paix and the adjacent streets?”

Celinda, with a nod, gave her approval of this programme, while Watson laughed good-humouredly.

“I’m afraid you’ll never be able to get on the boat,” warned the Spaniard gravely.

“But think how hard it is to buy anything where we come from!” exclaimed Celinda. “The place we live in is just as though it were the first week after the Creation. The only difference between us and Adam and Eve is that we have a few more neighbours, a few more clothes, and that we happen to be millionaires!”

They all laughed. But again their eyes grew dreamy as they thought of the scenes that they had helped to make. The camp at the dam had developed into what was now known as “Colonia Celinda”; and it was impossible to think of it without thinking also of the old man who was directing the development of the property, and who, as homes multiplied around him, seemed to grow smaller and smaller, while his profile took on a new sharpness of outline, making him resemble, as he stood listening to the men and women who came to him with their difficulties, a kindly but authoritative old patriarch.

And while the tentacles of the canal system were slowly creeping through the ancient basin of the Rio Negro, changing the once arid lands into fertile prairies, a stream of immigrants was bringing new money, new blood, new energy to the colony; and as they paid in year by year the purchase price of their farms, millions poured into the company’s offices.

And to Robledo there was a certain irony in the fact that wealth had come to him when he was already too old to feel the desires that tempt and divert other men. • Watson’s



children were already millionaires many times over ; it would never fall to their lot to know the enslaving power of toil, nor the anxieties of the need of money ; and at their coming of age they would undoubtedly come to Paris to pour out on its pleasures a part of their princely inheritance, attracting attention even there by their extravagance and the glitter of their idle and useless lives. But the very force of the contrast between their lives and his amused Robledo, and with the smiling fatalism of the man who in a long lifetime has known want and bitterness, he accepted this termination of his labours, finding it quite in keeping with the usual ironies of life.

There was another contrast, too, one which he often pondered, in the circumstances of his career. While he had been making himself a millionaire, one half of humanity, all that part of it separated from him by a wide ocean, had been suffering the horrors of a ghastly war. The first effect of this cataclysm had been to endanger his own enterprise, for the foreign colonists on his land had hastened to abandon their farms in order to join the troops of their respective nations. Then suddenly this general exodus stopped, to be followed by a veritable flood of new colonists.

Meanwhile, violent transformations were taking place in Europe. Many of those whom twelve years earlier he had known as rich men were now poverty-stricken, or else had disappeared. On the other hand, he who in those days had been a mere aspirant to fortune, a colonist whose future was of the most doubtful, now felt wearied by the exaggerated dimensions of his prosperity. He thought of himself as being like the steers of his friend, Don Carlos, who, overwhelmed by the very plentifulness of their fodder, stood knee-deep in alfalfa on legs too slender to support their enormous weight, while they looked with eyes that showed no trace of desire at the quantities of pasturage surrounding them.



Watson and Celinda were young, they still had illusions and desires, they had innumerable uses for their wealth. Celinda knew all the pleasures of luxury, and her husband could gratify that most universal of all the desires of a lover, the desire to give Celinda everything that she wanted. But as to himself, Manuel Robledo, multi-millionaire of the Argentine, not even the most innocent pleasures reserved to old age had for him any charm. Riches had come too late ; he had no time now to learn what to do with them.

The greater part of his life had been spent in an effort to simplify, to do without comforts, and now he no longer needed, no longer desired, the things other people consider indispensable. Celinda and her husband kept an expensive automobile standing at the hotel entrance from early morning to late at night. They could not live without having this means of locomotion at their beck and call. One would suppose that these two former crack riders had possessed a car from the moment they were born. Ah, youth ! What a marvellous adaptability it possesses for every kind of pleasure and luxury ! Only in cases of urgent haste did Robledo remember that he could purchase the services of an automobile. But on all other occasions he preferred to walk, or to employ the same means of locomotion as those used by people of moderate circumstances.

"It isn't meanness, nor miserliness," Celinda used to say, for with her woman's keenness of observation, she had learned to understand Robledo. "He simply doesn't think of these things, because they mean nothing to him."

The two engineers started from their day-dream as they heard Celinda inquire :

"And what are you going to do this afternoon, Don Manuel ? Why not come with me to the dressmaker's, so that you'll know just what you are talking about when you make fun of woman's frivolous pastimes ?"

But Robledo had other plans.



"I have a call to make, on a former class-mate who wants me to help him out in a business matter. A poor devil who's out of luck . . . but he has a scheme for manufacturing agricultural implements, and it may be that all he needs to set him on his feet is a little capital. He has invented a new kind of plough, he writes me."

The three friends walked slowly out to the street, and Richard and his young wife got into their car. Robledo, however, preferred to walk to the Place de L'Etoile, where he took the *métro* to Montmartre.

It was a late spring afternoon, the air was mild, the sky soft with a golden haze. Robledo swung along with the quick step of youth. Suddenly, the image of his unfortunate companion, Torre Bianca, crossed his mind. This was scarcely strange, for when he had last been in Paris it was as his friend's guest, and it was together that they had all three set out from the brilliant capital to seek their fortune in the deserts of Southern Argentina. . . . Natural enough, too, that the thought of this other engineer friend of his whom he was at that moment going to see, who was in desperate straits also and burdened with a family, should make him think of the ill-fated Marqués.

Very often in the last twelve years, in the life of monotonous work that he had led, with few new impressions coming in to blot out old ones, he had thought of Torre Bianca's tragic story and had wondered what had been Elena's fate after her flight. . . .

Nor was it easy to forget the woman whose evil influence persisted so long after she herself had disappeared. The old inhabitants of La Presa who had remained faithful to the land and had not abandoned the ruined town, had handed down the legend of how a woman had come to that desert community from the old world, a woman who, beautiful and possessed of a fateful charm, had brought ruin and death to all those who had fallen under her spell. Those who



knew her only from hearing the legend that had grown up about her, imagined her a kind of witch, and attributed to the vanished "*Cara Pintada*," the "Painted Face," all kinds of nameless crimes ! It was even whispered that at times those who strayed in solitary spots along the river bank, caught glimpses of her, and always she brought evil upon those to whom she appeared. . . .

On his occasional trips to Buenos Aires Robledo had tried to get some news of that Moreno who had been the companion of Elena's flight. But he had never been able to learn anything definite. Evidently, both fugitives had vanished in the restless crowds of Europe as completely and tracelessly as do those who sink in the frothing sea.

"She must have died," Robledo would say to himself. "Without doubt she is dead. A woman of her kind would not be likely to live long."

And for months at a time she would drop out of his mind ; then some allusion on the part of the old inhabitants would awaken his memories of the vanished Marquésa.

As he went down the steps of the station near the Arc de Triomphe, he had quite forgotten the unlucky couple. The human tide sweeping into the depths of the *métro* carried him along with it, and in a few minutes he climbed out to the street level, once more on the opposite side of the city.

As evening closed in, he left his friend's house which was in a modest side street, and walked along the Boulevard Rochechuart, towards the Place Pigalle.

On his evening excursions through Montmartre with South American friends, eager to enjoy the puerile and specious delights of all-night restaurants, he had never gone further than this square. Moreover, the aspect of this part of Paris is by night far more pleasing than by day.

The crowds passing along the boulevard he was following were of ordinary or vulgar appearance. Evidently, the



Montmartre, of which foreigners spoke with such enthusiasm, while its name was uttered as though it were a magic word by the members of certain youthful groups on the other side of the Atlantic, began at the Place Pigalle. This Boulevard Rochechouart was like a frontier region, and lacked any distinctive character of its own. Doubtless its inhabitants were poor devils expelled from Montmartre proper by the necessity of finding cheaper lodgings than were available in that famous quarter, or else they were novices in the life of pleasure, who had not yet acquired the clothes nor the manners suitable for a successful night-restaurant career.

As darkness thickened, the number of women on the street increased. . . . For them the kind uncertainties of twilight were a necessary assistance in their pursuit of men and bread.

Robledo passed them as though blind to their glances and deaf to their whisperings. "Young man," he thought he heard, and "A handsome fellow."

"Poor creatures! 'To get a meal they feel obliged to tell these outrageous lies. . . ."

Suddenly, his attention was drawn to one of them. There was little to distinguish her from the others. Like them, she was looking at him with bold and provocative glances. But those eyes . . . where had he seen those eyes?

She was dressed with a kind of poverty-stricken elegance. Her clothes, old and faded, had once, long years ago, been of handsome material and fashionable cut. From a distance they might still deceive; and she still preserved a slenderness which, with her unusual height, made one forget momentarily the ravages poverty and age had made upon her. "

When she saw Robledo stopping to look at her, she smiled at him with childish sincerity. This was a promising catch, the best of the afternoon. Her prospective customer



had all the appearance of being a rich foreigner wandering without his bearings in a quarter he had never strayed into before, and to which he was not likely to return. There was no time to lose.

Meanwhile, Robledo stood motionless, looking at her with frowning brows as he searched his memory.

"Who is this woman? . . . Where the devil have I seen her?"

She too had stopped, turning back to smile and invite him with a gesture to follow her.

Robledo's expression showed that he was alternating between surprise and doubt.

"Could it be? . . . But he had thought her dead years ago! No, it was impossible. He had been thinking of her that very afternoon, that was why he had made this mistake. . . . It would be too extraordinary a coincidence. . . ."

He was still eyeing her, believing that he recognized the past in certain lines of that faded face, and confused by others which he did not recognize. But those eyes! Those eyes!

The woman smiled once more, slightly moving her head, and repeating her silent invitations. Impelled by curiosity, Robledo involuntarily made a scarcely perceptible gesture of acceptance, and she walked on. But she had taken only a few steps when she stopped before the screen door leading into a bar of squalid appearance through the smeared windows of which he saw vapid faces staring. Standing at the door of this place, she winked at him and then disappeared into the interior of the filthy establishment.

Robledo stood hesitant. It disgusted him to think of having the slightest of relations with this woman, but at the same time his curiosity about her made him uncomfortable. He felt certain that if he went away without speaking with her he would forever be tormented by a persistent doubt, he would always regret not having made sure



whether this phantom of Elena had really been Elena herself.

And fear of being obsessed by this doubt turned the scale of his indecision. . . . With a violent push he swung open the door.

Tables, a decrepit cane settee against the wall; dingy mirrors, and a counter behind which were numerous shelves full of bottles, guarded by a woman, old and monstrously fat, her face mottled with pimples and scabs.

Robledo recognized the place as one of those frequented by women who, though dependent on the day's chance meetings for their sustenance, still wish to preserve a certain independence, though often enough they are glad to accept the services of the proprietress of the saloon, to which they bring patrons, as adviser and procuress.

A waiter of effeminate appearance was serving the clients who at this moment were two, a young woman so ghastly pale that it seemed as though the hollows and joints of her skull would soon show through the tight-drawn, transparent skin. In the intervals between her convulsive coughs she puffed hungrily at a cigarette. At another table sat a woman, now old and abject, who perhaps had been handsome in her youth. She, too, like the woman Robledo had followed, still preserved a distinctive slenderness, but her clothes and general appearance indicated a more advanced stage of poverty. She was drinking, with slow gulps, the contents of a large glass, closing her eyes and rolling her head on the back of the divan as though she were drunk.

When Robledo came in, he noticed that the woman he was seeking had gone to sit down at a table at the back of the room, at as great a distance as possible from the counter and the other patrons. His own arrival created quite a stir. The proprietress welcomed him with an obsequious smile, and the consumptive girl cast him a glance which was intended to be passionate, but which Robledo took as a



pathetic begging for alms. The drunken woman also gave him a smile which revealed the absence of several front teeth. Then she winked an invitation at him, but on seeing that all his attention was directed elsewhere, she cynically shrugged her shoulders and dozed off again.

He sat down at a table opposite the woman who had aroused his curiosity, so as to be able to watch her more closely than was possible in the street ; and he almost smiled as he discovered how deceptive the vagabond's appearance of shabby elegance was.

From a distance, the air with which she wore her clothes might have taken in the humble or the imaginative man who is disposed to believe in the elegance of any woman who pays him some attention. But viewed from close at hand, this elegance was discovered to be so fictitious as to be grotesque. Her hat, of impressive proportions, revealed a frayed brim and broken feathers. Her skirt, when she sat down, left her legs exposed, and it would have been difficult to count the holes and darns in her stockings. One of her shoes was worn through to the ground, and on the other the leather had spilt over one of the toes. Her face was covered with rouge, and a white paste which did not succeed in concealing its wrinkles and other signs of a hard life. But those eyes !

There were moments when he felt convinced . . . this *was* Elena. They both looked at one another fixedly. Then, with a gesture, she asked if she could draw nearer, and finally came to sit down at his table.

" I thought we had better come in here to talk. Men don't usually like to be seen with a woman in the street. Most of them are married. But perhaps you are not like the others in that respect. . . ."

Her voice was hoarse ; it did not in any way recall the one he had heard twelve years ago ; yet in spite of this fact, his conviction grew



"It is she," he thought. "There is no doubt of it. . . ."

"I may be wrong," the woman went on. "But I think you must be a bachelor. I don't see any wedding-ring. . . ."

And she looked smilingly at the masculine hands on the table opposite her. But something else preoccupied her far more than the civil status of the gentleman who had followed her. She kept looking anxiously toward the counter near which the waiter had taken up a position, in expectation of the new patron's order.

"May I order something?" she asked. "The whisky here is fine. There's no better in the city."

When he saw the gentleman nod, the waiter came up, and without waiting for directions, brought a whisky bottle and two glasses. After pouring out the drinks, he withdrew to a discreet distance, not, however, without casting at Robledo a glance and smile that closely resembled those bestowed upon him by the mistress of the establishment.

The women drained her glass with avidity, and then, as she noticed that the contents of the other glass were still untouched, an imploring look passed through her eyes.

"Before the war, whisky didn't cost much, but now . . . only kings and millionaires can afford it. May I . . . ?"

The hand stretched out toward Robledo's glass trembled with eagerness. He nodded, and the woman drained this glass, too, at a gulp.

The liquor seemed to dispel the torpor he had noticed in her words and gestures. Her eyes brightened, and she began speaking more rapidly. Suddenly, she asked him in Spanish :

"Where are you from? I knew at once from your accent that you were American . . . South American. . . . From Buenos Aires, perhaps?"

Robledo shook his head, and gravely produced a lie.

"I am a Mexican."

"I don't know Mexico very well. I spent a few days



in Vera Cruz once, between steamers. But I know the Argentine. I lived there once, years ago. . . . Where haven't I been ! There isn't a language on earth that I don't speak ! That's why the men like me, and my women friends are all envious."

Robledo was looking fixedly at her. This woman was Elena, he could no longer doubt it. Yet there remained here nothing of the woman he had known in the past. The last twelve years weighed on her more heavily than all her previous existence, stamping her with all the repugnant and distressing signs of moral and physical decrepitude.

He had been able to recognize her only because, leading a solitary, monotonous life, his impressions of the past remained clear and distinct, refreshed from time to time by long hours of brooding remembering, and never blotted out under new impressions, super-imposed. She, on the other hand, had lived so rapidly, had seen so many men pass through her life, that she could not remember Robledo. To do so she would have to make a determined effort of attention. And, besides, Robledo, too, had changed with the years. Yet, with the never quite dormant instinct of the professional courtesan, who, living by the chase, develops a kind of tactual memory, she too felt that somewhere this man had sat near her before.

"I can't remember where we have met," she said, with a reminiscence of the Marquésa's manners. "I have passed through so many countries, and I have known so many men ! . . ."



## CHAPTER XX

ROBLEDO looked sharply at her and asked brusquely  
“What is your name?”

But, her eyes on the whisky bottle, she was thinking of something else, and she replied absently:

“My name is Blanca, though some of the people around here call me ‘La Marquésa.’ But . . . will you buy me another drink? . . . Because, if we drop in at my house later, there won’t be any whisky like this there. We will go there, won’t we? . . . It’s quite near . . . though, of course, you might prefer the hotel?”

She took his silence to be consent and hastened to pour out a third glassful, which she drank with as much avidity as she had the others.

But Robledo interrupted her.

“Your name is Elena, and if people call you ‘La Marquésa’ it is because some one who knew you when you were married to an Italian Marqués recognised you.”

His words startled her so much that she removed the glass from her lips, and looked with wide eyes at Robledo.

“Since the very first word you spoke, I felt sure that you knew me,” she murmured.

Mechanically she set down her glass. But she suddenly made haste to drain it, and then looked at her companion with an expression of unfathomable amazement.

“But who are you? . . . Who can you be? . . . Who *are* you?”

At the first question she leaned closer to Robledo, but then she drew back as though afraid to touch him, and as she repeated the question she raised her hands to her breasts



as though making a painful effort to awaken her memory. Finally, in a discouraged tone, she repeated :

“ But there have been so many men in my life ! ”

Suddenly, a look of anxiety came into her eyes, followed by fear, and then the expression of a frightened animal. She was afraid of the man sitting opposite her.

“ I know you now,” she murmured. “ Yes, it’s you all right. You’ve changed, but it’s still you. But I’d never have known you if you hadn’t mentioned what you did.”

Then she seemed to take courage, and looked long at him without any signs of fear. At last she added hoarsely :

“ It would have been better if we had never met again ! ”

They sat in silence for several minutes. Elena seemed to have forgotten the existence of the bottle that she was still caressing mechanically. But finally the Spaniard’s curiosity broke into this silence.

“ What happened to Moreno ? ”

She listened with an expression of wonder and doubt, as though she did not understand. From her eyes one could see that she was making a tremendous mental effort, one which stirred her to the depths. Moreno ? . . . Who was Moreno ? . . . She had known so many men !

As though having recourse to a relieving medicament, she helped herself to another glass of whisky, and when she had gulped it down, her face brightened with a smile.

“ Oh, I know who you mean. . . . Moreno . . . a poor sort of fellow, crazy. I don’t know anything about him.”

Robledo persisted in his questions, but for all her goodwill the woman opposite him could not find in the chambers of her memory any clear, constant image of the man mentioned.

“ I think he died. . . . He went away to his home, and he must have died there. Did you say he never came back ? Well, perhaps he killed himself. I don’t remember. If I had to remember the history of all the men I have known,



I'd have been crazy years ago. . . . My head couldn't hold them. . . ."

But Robledo, looking sternly at her, continued his questions.

"And Pirovani's daughter?"

Again she raised her hands to her breasts . . . and again her expression indicated a tremendous mental effort.

"Pirovani? . . . Oh, yes! That Italian who lived in Rio Negro, and whose money Moreno ran away with. . . . No, we never mentioned his daughter. . . . Moreno spent it all, and I showed him how to have a good time. . . . Poor fool!"

Now she sat huddled in her chair, her head drooping on her breast. She appeared to have shrunk; and when, raising her eyes, she met Robledo's stern ones, she dropped hers again to the bottle.

In the silence that followed, Robledo was saying to himself:

"And to think that for this wretched rag of a creature men should have killed each other, women wept, and I should have been made to suffer such torments of anxiety!"

As though divining his thoughts, Elena said humbly:

"You don't know what I've been through these last years. . . . When the war came, they began to persecute me . . . wanted to drive me out of Paris. And they suspected me, thought I was a German spy, thought I was this, that and the other thing. I went to Italy, I went to many other countries, even your country. . . . Aren't you Spanish? . . . . Don't wonder at the question. I don't remember so many things. . . . And when I got back to Paris, I couldn't find a soul here I knew. Everything was different before the war. It was another world. Every single soul I knew had died or disappeared. I felt as though I had dropped on to another planet. How lonely it has been!"

She sat as though overwhelmed by this new world that was beyond her comprehension.



"And the only person I have met since then who could remind me of the past . . . is you ! Better if we hadn't met again . . . ."

Then she continued, as though talking to herself :

"And this meeting is going to make me think of things that I had forgotten forever. Why did you come back from so far away ? What made you come over to this part of Montmartre where rich foreigners never come, never ? Oh, what a cursed chance !"

Suddenly she straightened up, and he noticed a bluish film over her eyes.

"Let me drink. How grateful I'd be, if you would make me a present of the rest of this bottle ! I'll need it after meeting you like this. It's going to make me think of too many things. I love life ! . . . Better than anything. . . . and I'm not afraid of misfortune nor poverty, if I can only go on living . . . but I'm afraid of memories, and whisky kills them . . . or else it takes the sting out of them. . . . Let me drink . . . don't refuse !"

And as Robledo remained silent, Elena took possession of the bottle and filled her glass twice in succession, but now she drank slowly, enjoying each drop that crossed her palate. And as she drank she pointed out the girl who was still smoking and coughing.

"They're all like that here . . . morphine, cocaine, all that kind of thing is what they go in for. But I'm old-fashioned. Drugs make me sick. This is the only thing for me !"

And her hands lovingly caressed the neck of the whisky bottle. A strange lucidity animated her face more and more as she drank. But, at finding herself the undisputed owner of the whisky, she wanted to be alone to enjoy it quietly, and she said quietly to Robledo :

"Go away now, and forget me. If you want to give me something, if I be grateful, of course. But if you don't,



I'll be content with the bottle. That's a princely gift . . . go away, Robledo . . . you don't belong here."

But he paid no attention to her words. He still wanted to prod her memory, to draw from it another episode of her mysterious past.

"And Canterac? . . . Did you ever meet Captain Canterac again?"

But the name was even less effective in bringing her memory to life than the others he had mentioned. To help her out, he recalled the park made in her honour on the banks of the Rio Negro.

"That was a unique party! I remember. . . . But other men have done even more extravagant things for me than that . . . still it was an original idea. . . . Poor captain! I saw him a great many times afterwards. I think he's a general now. What did you say his name was?"

She went on talking about what she remembered of him, but Robledo discovered that she was confusing Canterac with some other officer whom she had known. She was making one person of two whom she had met in different periods of her life.

Robledo was practically certain that Canterac had died. For some time the unhappy Frenchman had wandered from one to another of the republics on the Pacific coast, making a scant living, now in the Chilian saltpetre mines, now in the mines of Bolivia and Peru. When the war broke out, he returned to France to join the army. And there, like so many others, he had died, in the performance of some act of obscure heroism.

And this woman who had so tragically turned the current of his life, not only had kept no clear image of him in her memory; she could not even remember his name!

But as Robledo's questions pursued her one by one, her memory freed itself somewhat from its torpor, and some of



the images stirred by his proddings, were now crowding in on her mind. Suddenly, it was she who had a question to ask.

"What's the name of that American boy, a friend of yours, wasn't he? I really think he was the only man of all the men who have run after me that I ever cared for, perhaps because he never really cared anything about me. Sometimes, at long intervals, I have thought of him. . . . Did he marry?"

Robledo nodded.

"That's all you need tell me. As I sit here looking at you, it seems as though the years that had passed were passing again, but in a reverse direction, and I am beginning to remember everything. . . . That young man's name was Richard, and he's probably married the girl from the pampas . . . they called her by the name of some flower. . . ."

But these memories, the only ones capable of surging, clear and living, aroused in her the embittered sadness of hopeless envy. Other women were prosperous, yes . . . and happy; but she had chosen to forget . . . why must she be reminded?

She glanced down at herself with a kind of pitying contempt, as though seeing herself for the first time. She, who for long years had thought Elena the centre of creation, now saw herself sunk very low, and divined that there were even lower depths to which she was destined to descend.

Other women might find melancholy pleasure in summoning the past to mind. For them it was like a sweet old tune, or the perfume of faded flowers. But for her the past was a pack of raging wolves that would pursue her until death. Only by living in a state of stupor could she escape the torture of their fangs. And for her only those days were endurable when she succeeded in drugging her mind with alcohol.

Apparently, she wanted the relief afforded by seeing some one else symbolise the despair she felt. She pointed to the other woman who, half drunk, was dozing on the settle.



"I'll be like that soon."

Her face darkened as though the shadow of her last hours had passed over it. She lowered her eyes as she added :

"And then, death."

Robledo kept silence. He had quietly taken his pocket-book from one of his pockets and was counting something under the table. She, meanwhile, went on murmuring the thoughts that normally she would have kept to herself.

"Perhaps some one will put a few lines in the papers, announcing the death of the so-called 'Marquésa,' and perhaps half a dozen people in the whole world will remember me, perhaps not even so many. And meanwhile I shall stay at the bottom of the river, forever. And what shall I have amounted to?"

Robledo picked up one of her hands and, under cover of the table, pressed a roll of bills into it. She guessed at once what it was.

"I oughtn't to take it," she protested. "I take money only from those who don't know me. . . ."

But she nervously tucked the bank notes into her blouse ; and as she did so her eyes, which had suddenly brightened, gave the lie to the tone of resigned dignity with which she offered excuses for accepting the gift.

But now Robledo was looking at her pityingly. The once fair Elena. . . . What a pathetic sight ! She had swept over the southern seas like a great albatross, proud of its snowy plumage and the strength of its wings, plunging down with merciless voracity on the prey it glimpses between the waves, strong with the belief that the universe has been created solely to be devoured by it ; she had been a majestic, proud Atlantic eagle, salt from the wide sweeps of the ocean, possessing the tough-fleshed elasticity of the carnivores. . . . But the acid of the years had dissolved the proud illusion all youth possesses of its immortality ; and the eagle that had so many times haughtily planed upward into the infinite



blue, was now obliged to feed on the ocean's offal as the tide brought it in to the shore. And when cold and darkness drove it towards the light, its failing wings bruised themselves against the glass guarding the fire. Weary, it had gone in search of the window that sent out into the night the warm glow of the hospitable hearth ; and it had encountered the lens of the lighthouse, hard and unfeeling as any wall, made to withstand the fury of tempests. And in one of these encounters it would fall with wings incurably broken, and the sea below, the surging sea of life, would bear away its body on its tides, with an indifference as complete as that with which it had earlier borne away the relentless creature's victims. . . .

And then Robledo found himself considering his friends and himself as well, as though they too were animals. Oxen they were, well-fed, tranquil and good, like the cattle out in the pastures irrigated by the colony ditches, fat and plain like them, oppressed with well-being. They possessed the virtues characteristic of all those whose maintenance is assured, and who, safe from all risk, need never injure others in order to live. And thus they would continue placidly, without violent pleasures, but also without pain, to the last hour. . . .

And who of all these would have the better justified their existence ? . . . That woman of novelesque biography, whose brain was incapable of remembering exactly either her origin or her adventures ? Or they, those peaceful ruminants, who had done on earth what it had been required of them to do, and who, as a result, had won a degree, at least, of happiness ? . . .

But he was not allowed to go on with his meditations. The waiter had been summoned to the street by a man gesticulating from the other side of the window, and now he came back with a worried expression to murmur a few words in the proprietress' ear.



"Fly away, my doves!" the woman suddenly cried out from behind her counter to the clients nearest her. Then excitedly she explained that the police were making a haul of all the women of the quarter, and might visit her establishment. A faithful friend had just brought the warning.

The consumptive girl threw away her cigarette, and escaped like a frightened doe. As she went, she broke into even more painful coughing. The drunken woman opened her eyes, looked about her, and closed them again, murmuring:

"Let them come! A decent woman can sleep just as well in the police station as here!"

Elena made haste to run for cover. But even though she was scared, she walked toward the door with a certain dignity, at the thought that there was a man behind her. She did not wish to be confused with the others.

When he found himself alone, Robledo gave the waiter a bank-note, and went away without waiting for the change. Arrived on the boulevard, he looked unavailingly this way and that. Elena had disappeared. . . .

He would never see her again. . . . When she died he would receive no news of her death. He would have to live all the rest of his life without knowing for a certainty whether she were still alive. . . . Yet, after this encounter it was easy to divine her end. Undoubtedly, she was of the number of those who leave this life by tragic means but without noise, without anyone's even mentioning their names.

"And so this is Elena," he said to himself. "An Elena, who, like the heroine of the poets of old, brought about war between men, in a far-away corner of the globe. . . ."

Doubt was troubling him with its questions. Had this woman been really bad, fully conscious of her perversity? Had she been simply hungry for the pleasures of life, and ambitious, making her way over the fallen bodies of others without knowing what she was treading underfoot?



While he was looking for a taxi, he said to himself by way of conclusion :

“ It would have been better if she had died twelve years ago. What does she go on living for ? ”

He smiled sadly as he thought of the relative importance and unimportance of human values, and personages, according to the circles in which they move.

“ And this poor human rag was just as important as Homer’s heroine in that half-civilised land where women are few ! . . . But what would the men who did so many mad things for her sake say now, if they were to see her as I have seen her to-day ? ”

When he reached the hotel, Watson and Celinda had just returned from their afternoon’s outing.

Two servants were following Celinda bearing enormous packages, evidently the trophies of the afternoon’s shopping.

Watson looked impatiently at his watch.

“ Nearly seven, and we have to dress and eat something before going to the opera. When women once get into a shop there’s no getting them out of it ! ”

Celinda soon disposed of her husband’s pretended ill-humour, and together the young couple went into the adjoining room to dress for dinner.

“ Are you coming with us ? ”

“ No,” Robledo replied. “ I am getting old, and it bores me stiff to get into evening clothes and white gloves just to listen to music. No, I’d rather stay at the hotel. I’ll see to it that they put Carlos to bed in good order . . . and anyway I promised him a story.”

While he talked he felt all the uneasiness of uncertainty . . . should he tell Celinda and her husband about the afternoon’s chance meeting ? . . . Would it be more prudent to tell it only to Watson ?

On the rare occasions when their conversation had in-



cluded allusions to Torre Bianca's wife, Celinda, usually so light-hearted and even-tempered, had frowned as though she could not bear even the name of the Marquésa.

Perhaps now the knowledge of the detested woman's abject state would cause her a cruel satisfaction. . . . But Robledo repented of this thought. Celinda surely had no room for feelings of revenge in her happiness ! And if so, news of the Marquésa could only cause her the discomfort of an unpleasant memory.

Why revive the past ? . . . Let life go on ! . . .

And Robledo gave all his attention to making up the marvellous story that he was going to tell to his young friend and chief heir.

FINIS.











